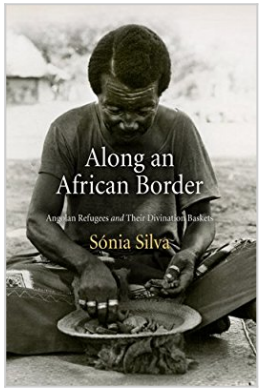

Along an African Border: Angolan Refugees and Their Divination Baskets (Contemporary Ethnography)

By Sonia Silva

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The divination baskets of south Central Africa are woven for a specific purpose. The baskets, known as *lipele*, contain sixty or so small articles, from seeds, claws, and minuscule horns to wooden carvings. Each article has its own name and symbolic meaning, and collectively they are known as *jipelo*. For the Luvale and related peoples, the *lipele* is more than a container of souvenirs; it is a tool, a source of crucial information from the ancestral past and advice for the future.

In *Along an African Border*, anthropologist Sónia Silva examines how Angolan refugees living in Zambia use these divination baskets to cope with daily life in a new land. Silva documents the special processes involved in weaving the baskets and transforming them into oracles. She speaks with diviners who make their living interpreting *lipele* messages and speaks also with their knowledge-seeking clients. To the Luvale, these baskets are capable of thinking, hearing, judging, and responding. They communicate by means of *jipelo* articles drawn in configurations, interact with persons and other objects, punish wrongdoers, assist people in need, and, much like humans, go through a life course that is marked with an initiation ceremony and a special burial. The *lipele* functions in a state between object and person.

Notably absent from *lipele* divination is any discussion or representation in the form of symbolic objects of the violence in Angola or the Luvale's relocation struggles—instead, the consultation focuses on age-old personal issues of illness, reproduction, and death. As Silva demonstrates in this sophisticated and richly illustrated ethnography, *lipele* help people maintain their links to kin and tradition in a world of transience and uncertainty.

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Review

"With great originality, [Silva] accesses the life stories of these human subjects through the material objects with which they (inter-)relate. . . . Silva provides a stimulating model for any researcher hoping to partner with individuals in their efforts to confront the myriad ways they are objectified, whether by circumstances, by the state, or by scholarship."—*Journal of Religion in Africa*

"Silva's close study makes a valuable addition to the growing repertoire of ethnographic accounts of divination in Africa and the peoples who continue to invoke it as a pivotal cultural institution. . . . It is a tightly woven work that parallels the craftsmanship that Silva details in her study of divinatory baskets."—*History of Religions*

"A thought-provoking study of the dynamics of divination in a refugee population seeking stability in a disrupted world through an ancient and effective 'way of knowing.' Using the frame of a divination basket's life history from birth to adulthood, Silva provides a rich contextual study of the various paths to understanding presented by the core cultural institution of divination: material culture and art, economic theory, gender relations, the nature of knowledge, ethnography, jurisprudence, and personhood."—Philip M. Peek, Drew University

"In addition to a useful debate between the economics and business awareness approach, or the personification of ritual, this book contains very useful and detailed descriptions of basket divination rituals and Angolan basket weaving techniques that will be useful to the general reader and students of African studies."—*Journal of American Academy of Religion*

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Introduction

A *lipele* is a basket that contains sixty or so small articles, from seeds, claws, and minuscule horns to coins and wooden carvings. These articles have individual names and symbolic meanings; collectively, they are known as *jipelo*. People in northwest Zambia will tell you that a lipele is first and foremost a material object, a *chuma*, much like a food basket, a hammer, a stool, or a house. Yet they will also say that the *lipele* is an

extraordinary object. A *lipele*, it is said, is capable of thinking, hearing, judging, and responding; it communicates by means of *jipelo* articles drawn in configurations, punishes wrongdoers, assists people in need, and, much like humans, goes through a life course. This is not to suggest that the *lipele* is seen as a human person and self, a *mutu*. In my two years of fieldwork in Chavuma, a district of northwest Zambia located along the Angolan border, no one showed interest in such ontological quandaries, but it took little time and research to realize that the *lipele* lacks at least one basic human attribute: a human body (*mujimba wamutu*). What, then, is the *lipele*? What kind of entity is this, which is and is not a thing and is and is not a person?

The Fetish in "Fetish"

The idea of fetish comes to mind, but the term is loaded with prejudice. *Fetish* derives from *fetisso*, a Pidgin word that emerged in the mercantile, multicultural context of the Guinea Coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988). In the words of William Smith, an Englishman who embarked on a voyage to Guinea in 1726, "fittish" refers to "some Trifle or other, to which they [Pagans] pay a particular Respect, or Kind of Adoration, believing it can defend them from all Danger's: Some have a Lion's Tail; some a Bird's Feather. Some a Pebble, a Bit of Rag, a Dog's Leg; or, in short, any thing they fancy" (1744:26, quoted in Pietz 1987:41). In the eyes of Smith and other Europeans who traveled to Guinea, many of them merchants, *fetissos* stood for Africans, people who live in chaos and lack reason, adoring any thing they fancy and failing to distinguish between objects and humans. In 1757, Charles de Brosses would turn *fetishes* into *fetishism*, a discourse of otherness into a primitive mode of thought, and it was through the work of de Brosses that fetishes came to influence nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers, such as Comte, Marx, and Freud (Ellen 1988).

As early as the late nineteenth century, however, the concept of fetish came under attack. In 1884, William Robertson-Smith dismissed it as "a merely popular term which conveys no precise idea, but is vaguely supposed to mean something very savage and contemptible" (1884:209, quoted in Ellen 1988:215). In 1906, Marcel Mauss denounced the "unmerited and fortuitous role that the notion of fetish has played in theoretical and descriptive works," because "it corresponds to nothing but an immense misunderstanding between two civilizations, the African and the European" (1968:112, quoted in Pietz 1993:133). More recently, William Pietz has shown that fetishism, far from being specific to a concrete society or type of societies, is a "problem-idea" of Enlightenment theory whose pedigree he meticulously traces back, as mentioned, to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cross-cultural region of West Africa (1985).

One would think that the term *fetish* would have become anathema in anthropology and been dismissed as vague, useless, depreciative, and racist. One would think that it would have been at the very least conceptually reconstituted as a historical misunderstanding between two civilizations, as Pietz proposes. Maybe it is a testament to the fetishistic qualities of the term itself that anthropologists continue to surrender to its enchantment. There is no other term like it—*ritual object*, *sacred object*, or *power figure* can hardly compare with *fetish*—so anthropologists and other scholars continue using it, while at the same time they strive in all earnestness to separate themselves from its tainted history. Thus it is that the embarrassment of a historically loaded and loathsome term has given way to the embarrassment of an apologetic expression: "*fetish* in quotes."

Most anthropologists today, though, are no longer using fetishism as a discourse of difference. Not only are they recognizing that divination baskets or other such entities are as active as ever throughout the world, from Zambia to Europe, but also they are using fetishism as a discourse of sameness.

Consider Wyatt MacGaffey's fascinating study of *minkisi*, those visually striking figurines, clay pots, gourds, bundles, and other containers from the early twentieth-century Lower Congo with empowering spirits that

come from the land of the dead (2000). Best known to the world is a subclass of these, the awe-inspiring *nkondi*, often prized in ethnographic and art museums as "nail fetishes." Although MacGaffey reminds his readers that the *minkisi* ought to be understood in their original sociocultural and historical context, he also recognizes basic functional similarities between them and a spate of Western objects, religious and secular: relics of saints in medieval Europe, national monuments, engagement rings, national flags, and works of art (1990). At least functionally, MacGaffey appears to be suggesting that we are all fetishists, if not literally, then with quotes.

Roy Ellen arrives at the same conclusion from a different theoretical perspective. Having studied fetishism among the Nualu of Seram, Indonesia, he offers good reasons to accept its universality on cognitive grounds and, consequently, to use the term without quotes—even though, he tells us, he has "no particular desire to salvage terms once thought obsolete or retain old concepts as they stand, and thinks [that he] would actually resist applying the word 'fetish' to ritual objects [he] might encounter in the course of ethnographic analysis" (1988:232, 1990). The label may be irremediably tarnished, but Ellen assures us that there are fetishes and there is fetishism. Nualu sacred shields, Kongo *minkisi*, Bamana *boli*, Fon *bocio*, Luvale *lipele*, and other such entities studied in anthropology and art history are well-known examples of fetishes; other examples are the hands, feet, buttocks, fur, safety pins, high-heeled shoes, items of female underclothing, and other nongenital objects and parts of anatomy of mostly Western, male pathological obsession, studied in psychology, and the equally mystifying commodity fetishes of capitalism, studied by Marx. All fetishes, Western and non-Western, are created through the same cognitive processes: concretization (objectification of a concept), animation, conflation of signifier and signified, and development of an ambiguous relationship of control between object and person (Ellen 1988). Where MacGaffey sees function, Ellen sees cognition.

There is a third, more radical alternative: drop the term entirely and study the phenomenon from a perspective that is ideologically less problematic and heuristically more inclusive—commoditization. For Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, all things everywhere make new sense in the light of this perspective, be it Korean toothpicks, slaves on the Middle Passage, oriental carpets, relics of saints from early medieval Europe, funerary canoes from the Solomon Islands, Lozi royal property, designer-label clothing, human fetuses, or Turkmen saddlebags. Appadurai and Kopytoff are interested in the exchangeability potential of all things regardless of what kind of thing they are, and they claim that it is possible to trace their movement in and out of the commodity state by following what Kopytoff calls their "cultural biography" (1986). And, in the same way that persons come to realize their personhood potential by different means and to different degrees, so do things realize their exchangeability potential differently, some remaining in the commodity state from beginning to end and others being removed permanently or temporarily from that state and placed elsewhere—the case of the lipele. Lest we forget the commodity potential of all things, even the most singular and sacred, Appadurai labels the latter "ex-commodities" or, because of the zeal with which they are protected and guarded from commoditization, "enclaved commodities" (1986:16, 22-23).

Notwithstanding their theoretical differences, all these authors (MacGaffey, Ellen, Appadurai, and Kopytoff) stand on common ground. They all see the ambiguity between thingness and personhood as the defining characteristic of fetishism. However phrased to suit particular approaches—person and object or singularity and commodity—ontological categories are seen as fluid. MacGaffey perceives a continuum between the personification of minkisi and the objectification of Kongo chiefs in Bakongo political culture (1988:203, 2000:135). Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) speak of "commoditization" instead of "commodities" and expand their model to dialectically encompass both the commoditization of persons and singularization of things. And Ellen's cognitive approach contemplates the ambiguous power relation between fetish and fetishist (1988:228-29). Once erroneously taken by Auguste Comte and other Enlightenment intellectuals for a sign of malthought, deluded causality, and inferiority, ontological ambiguity is now seen as universal, dynamic, and creative.

Personification, Objectification, De-Objectification

I agree that ontological ambiguity is the crux of fetishism. From here on, however, I place in abeyance the question of which continuum—personification, fetishization, or (de)commoditization—best captures the biography of the *lipele*, a question that is dangerously close to searching for its true value—social, cognitive, or economic—and asking what kind of thing it is—person, fetish, or commodity. I also avoid as much as possible the kindred vocabulary in my ethnographic descriptions and, in a phenomenological spirit, move to historically situated social perception and existential concerns. For the men and women whom I met in Chavuma in the mid-1990s, what the *lipele* is hardly raises any interest, even for diviners (*vakakutaha*). For them, the *lipele* is what the *lipele does*, and because what the *lipele* does is divining, the *lipele* is an oracle (*ngombo*). "Oracles" is the class of objects in which the *lipele* rightly belongs, next to medicated pestles, mortars, bottles, mirrors, and human figures.

Furthermore, because divining is by definition an intersubjective practice (divination is always performed for someone else—and this someone is, existentially speaking, objectified), I suggest that the personification of an object is not only entailed with the diviner's controlled objectification through spirit possession within the bounded space of ritual but also with the engaged, passionate attempt by the diviner and his clients to de-objectify themselves outside ritual. The personification of a material object is ultimately devoid of meaning if severed from the existential objectification and de-objectification of individual subjects. The value of the *lipele*, in addition to being social, cognitive, and economic, is necessarily intersubjective and existential.

Note that by *objectification* I mean the sense of existential powerlessness, uncertainty, and diminution—the sense, to invert Grace Harris's definition of personhood, of having no standing (not "status") in a social order, of being a "nobody" incapable of acting or whose actions are of no consequence (1989:602). Although the sense of powerlessness that accompanies, say, a debilitating disease or childlessness in adulthood is often elusive (Silva 2009), in other cases, such as slavery and spirit possession, it may crystallize in cultural and social practice or become somatized. Psychological trauma may lead to the experience of paralysis, immobilization, withdrawal, automatization, or robotization. Persons interact with one another in a social world, and these interactions are as likely to become constructive as to become destructive. Being a person always entails the possibility of being nullified, ignored by others, forgotten, crushed, discarded, brushed off, kicked around, or blown up. In health or in illness the risk of becoming an object is ever present. "In no human society it is possible to draw anything but a transient and ambiguous line between subject and object," says Michael Jackson. "In our practical lives, the line is infringed continually. The field of intersubjectivity inescapably involves an ongoing reciprocal movement in consciousness between a sense of being a subject for oneself and being an object for others" (1998:77).

Basket divination is one way objectified individuals attempt to de-objectify themselves. How is the process of de-objectification perceived and achieved? To answer this question we must bear in mind that basket divination is a way of coping with adversity. Let us now consider three important ways in which divination was understood in northwest Zambia at the time of my fieldwork: a way of doing, a way of knowing, and a way of making a living.

Three Facets

Basket divination as a *way of doing* is ritual efficacy; it is doing things through ritual. In this book, I reveal how divinatory rituals do what they are supposed to do, paying close attention to ritual action, symbolism, and performative skill. With David Parkin (1991) and Richard Werbner (1989), I give equal importance to the interaction between ritual participants and the performative role of discourse; with Filip de Boeck and René Devisch (1994), I focus on symbolism. Although basket divination, as de Boeck and Devisch argue, is a "happening" that produces itself independently of the participants' personal motives and the consequences

it has on their society, it remains ultimately dependent on their skilled participation in the performance. I draw on the work of these authors—and on Victor Turner on liminality (1967, 1982) and Stanley Tambiah on ritual efficacy (1968, 1979)—to show that *lipele* rituals can produce results only if key symbols and performative elements are used with skill.

Basket divination, however, is much more than ritual form and performance. When a consulting party (*vatewa*) approaches a *lipele*, its members and the relative they represent find themselves in a critical state of obscurity and indecision. They hope that the revelation of knowledge will bring clarity, lead to spiritually sanctioned action, and bring some measure of control over life and events. Basket divination is a way of unraveling the cause of past or present troubles; it is a *way of knowing*.

Rescuing Africans from the miry realm of belief, which in the history of anthropology and Western philosophical thought is vaguely defined in opposition to so-called true knowledge, several authors have given analytical priority to this search for knowledge and depicted African divination (African traditional thought in general) as an epistemological system akin to Western science. This line of reasoning, however, leads to difficulties. For Robin Horton, African traditional thought constitutes a scientific but "closed" predicament, the awareness of alternatives being remarkably less developed than in the Western "open" predicament (1993/1967:153). For Igor Kopytoff, the Suku of the Democratic Republic of the Congo *know* (do not simply believe) that their ancestors exist, their system of thought being comparable to science, but this science of theirs differs from ours, corresponding to the nineteenth-century ideal of Positivism (1981). And, for Michael Jackson, the Kuranko pebble divinatory technique used in Sierra Leone is akin to social science, but its outlook is Positivist, because both systems use arcane vocabularies, a depersonalized style, and ceremonial forms of denying subjectivity; like the Positivist, the Kuranko diviner is "allegedly passive and receptive, the technique allegedly objective, the procedure allegedly impersonal" (1989:56). With one stroke, these authors promote African religious thought to a coeval epistemology and denigrate it to an anachronistic endeavor, if not a bastard science, as Frazer had once said of magic.

Jackson, however, soon veers onto a different route. Having placed Kuranko divination and Western science on the same footing, he refocuses his analysis under a pragmatist and existentialist light. The Kuranko as consulters, it turns out, have no interest in abstract questions of veracity because they view divinatory knowledge instrumentally (1996:6, 13). I see *lipele* knowledge in the same light. For the Luvale and related peoples, as for the Kuranko, divinatory knowledge is wedded to the pressing needs of daily life. For them, basket divination is not an epistemological exercise; it is a way of knowing that facilitates action.

I also circumvent the knowledge-belief dichotomy by depicting divination as embodied knowledge, a form of knowing in which there are no propositions to be true or false. To portray divination as an epistemology is to refer to propositional knowledge—Gilbert Ryle's "knowledge that" as distinct from "knowledge how" (1949:25-61)—the only type of knowledge that overlaps with belief. As Anthony Quinton points out, "Belief is always propositional or believing that; there is no believing how that serves as a defective version of knowing how to do something" (1967:346). Although it would be incorrect to disregard the importance of propositional knowledge in lipele divination, as we will see in Chapter 3, embodied knowledge is at least as fundamental. Not only is embodied knowledge of great significance in a political context where the re-articulation of one's identity, as will be shortly explained, cannot be achieved through narration (knowing-how is also remembering-how), embodied knowledge is also consistent with the definition of basket divination as a performative, practical activity.

And this brings me to the diviners' understanding of their profession as a *way of making a living*. Epistemological approaches compare divination to science, and symbolist and performative approaches compare it to theater and the arts. Devisch, for example, sees divination as an "artistic creation," a "happening," a play in which the actor is the play's own "autodialectical production," an agglomerate of

"forms, colors, rhythms, volumes interacting and embracing one another, rather than . . . fulfilling . . . the project of the artist or his patron or the spectator" (1985:71; see also Beattie 1964:61, 1966). Although these metaphors capture very vividly the expressive quality of divinatory rituals, they have the unfortunate effect of understating the reason why they are conducted in the first place. In the West, art is often created, performed, and judged independently of the anxieties and preoccupations of both artists and art viewers; a lipele session, however, is always conducted for someone in need.

Begging the question some, I should mention here how basket divination was described to me. No allusion was ever made to theater, art, or science. Laypeople who were potential consulters portrayed it as a quest for knowledge, a quest that is given metaphorical expression in the definition of each séance as a journey toward clarity (see Chapter 3). The diviners spoke of their rituals as a means to earn a livelihood, as they would of farming, fishing, and hunting. And by perceiving rituals, which they saw as qualitatively different from secular activities, as nonetheless secular, they urged me to dispense with such dichotomies as theory versus common sense, expressive versus instrumental, and sacred versus profane (Tambiah 1990).

There is an important difference between understanding basket divination as a way of knowing and as a way of making a living: the first appears to be universal and constitutive of divination as a cultural practice; the second is a reflection of the dire living conditions in 1990s Chavuma. This difference, however, should not conceal an equally important similarity: the existential equivalence between the consulters' suffering and the diviners' suffering. In the end, consulters and diviners are both sufferers for whom basket divination brings a measure of control over life and events.

The Experience of Adversity

I was often told that Chavuma, named by the Luvale chief Sakutemba Kaweshi after the rumbling waterfalls in the Zambezi River (*Chavuma* derives from *kuvuma,* "to rumble") had once been a land of abundant resources. Once the Zambezi and Kashiji rivers had overflowed with fish, the forests had swelled with game, the pale, windblown Kalahari sands that constitute the surface soil had been rich and fertile. Chavuma was no longer what it had once been, and the ones to blame, I was told, were the increasing numbers of Angolan refugees.

The first noticeable influx of Angolans occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. The Portuguese had recently established military posts in the eastern border region of Angola, and, by the 1920s, they were collecting taxes and recruiting unpaid *corvée* labor (Clarence-Smith 1983:186-87, Newitt 2008:45-60). To escape these burdens or seek employment in the mines of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), or South Africa, many villagers chose to cross the international borders. Between 1940 and 1950, the population of the border regions of Angola declined by 16 to 22 percent (Newitt 2008:64).

Discontent grew in the colony, and, in the 1960s, Angolans rebelled. A string of insurrections broke out in the north, central highlands, and Luanda, leading rapidly to military operations spearheaded by nationalist movements. Until 1966, most conflicts occurred in the northern region, with the guerrillas operating out of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). In 1966, however, a new front was opened in the east, as two separate liberation movements, the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), set up military bases in newly independent Zambia. Caught in the middle, accused of treason by both sides, villagers were resettled to colonial townships by the Portuguese and terrorized by the guerrillas. Several of the individuals mentioned in this book, including the basket diviners, arrived in Zambia at this time.

Independence came in 1975, after thirteen years of military conflict. The thrill of freedom, however, did not

last. In the run for political power in independent Angola, the opposing liberation movements forged alliances with the Cold War superpowers. The MPLA turned to Cuba and the USSR, and UNITA reached out to apartheid South Africa and the United States, thus locking the country in what David Birmingham calls "a war by proxy between the United States and the Soviet Union" (2006:111). The FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola), a third nationalist movement, was defeated in combat by the MPLA in 1975. The Cold War ended in the early 1990s, but the Angolan civil war continued, as the MPLA and UNITA found new ways to fund their military operations with national natural resources, the MPLA with oil and UNITA with diamonds.

By the end of 2001, just a few months prior to the cease-fire in April 2002, about 210,000 Angolans were living in Zambia (USCR 2002:53, UNHCR 2002:5). Some resided willingly or unwillingly in the official refugee settlements of Mayukwayukwa and Meheba, others stayed in the villages and townships of Western and North-Western provinces, and others still reached as far as the cities of the Copperbelt and Lusaka. In 1950, Chavuma's population was 3,003 (Hansen 1976:126); in 2000, following half a century of almost uninterrupted war, its population had grown seven times to a reported total of 21,617 (Central Statistical Office 2001). These were times of suffering and deep discontent.

In the mid-1990s, at the time of my fieldwork, the roots of suffering were visible in the physical and social landscape. The area adjoining the thirteenth parallel south, which constitutes the northern border, looked as if a giant machete had stabbed the earth and pushed all the trees southward. Although the Angolan side was densely covered with a thicket of grown trees, the Zambian side had hardly any forest left, every acre of land having been cleared for cassava fields. It is true that fruit trees and sugarcane studded the villages (*membo*); that the Christian Missions in Many Lands (CMML), founded in 1923, still provided some opportunities for trade, employment, and the services of a hospital; and that the motor road linked Chavuma to the township of Zambezi and the cities of the Copperbelt, prohibitive as transportation costs were. Most important, there was no war in Chavuma. But, in the 1990s, this was all there was to celebrate. People complained that there was hardly any land left to cultivate, any forest to clear, any game to hunt, and any fish to trap in the rivers and flooded plains. Having once lived in sparsely populated areas with abundant natural resources, many Angolans were now obliged to purchase farmland and even fish and meat to eat, or, in the absence of cash, to eat leaf dishes day in and day out, feeling neither full nor satisfied.

Chavuma was also enveloped in silence. The 1970 Zambian Refugees Control Act states very clearly that all refugees must live in official camps. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, government officials directly instructed the villagers to report any "strangers" to the authorities (Hansen 1976:27-28). For these "strangers"—the Angolans illegally settled along the border, among their kin—this translated into fear of repatriation or resettlement to the Meheba Refugee Settlement, located near Solwezi. They became distrustful of everyone, relative, neighbor, or stranger. In the 1990s, the Zambian government was no longer seeking out illegal refugees who had arrived prior to 1985, as is the case of the diviners and many others mentioned in this book, and many refugees had obtained Zambian registration cards, thus becoming de jure citizens (Hansen 1990:7, USCR 1987:21). Still the Angolans lived in fear. Maybe they were no longer illegal refugees. Maybe they would no longer be resettled to Meheba. Maybe they should no longer fear *delatores*. Life, however, had taught them that everything could change in a moment. It had in the past, and it could again.

Silencing the past stemmed also from fear of the past and not only from fear of the present. Violated individuals may repress or deny their painful memories, lack words to describe atrocities that are beyond their moral and conceptual thresholds, or protect themselves from the past by keeping their memories at bay, neither quite forgetting nor quite remembering them. A young Zimbabwean told Werbner that freedom fighters "don't like to talk about the war and their fighting. They sometimes sit alone or with others not talking, and they don't want to tell others about their experiences, which grieve them and trouble their

thoughts so much they just want to forget" (1991:157-58). To relive the past in reminiscence is to reenter it, not simply to represent it cognitively. Although the events and experiences lived in Angola could never be forgotten, they could at least be set aside by filling the days with chores and harmless chatter. The Angolans strove to fence off their lives in the present, away from the tormenting memories of the past and the insecurity of the future. The silence about the past was a conspicuous presence in Chavuma, as real and consequential as the words said and the things touched. It was collective, and it attested to a shared past and a shared present.

It was in this context that I carried out fieldwork on the topic of basket divination. During my preliminary research trip to Chavuma in 1994, I had assumed that the presence of basket diviners in the area had to do with the end of British rule, which had declared witch hunting (and, therefore, basket divination) illegal, and perhaps with the area's relative remoteness as well. That presence, however, was more directly related to Chavuma's proximity to Angola, a country where change had been abrupt and catastrophic. The diviners and many of their clients were Angolan refugees.

And yet, I could not identify any significant difference between basket divination in wartime and basket divination in peacetime. In the process of transmuting particular experiences of suffering into structural nodes of relationship and prototypical emotions, basket divination omitted recent history. The new and contingent fused with the old and universal.

The divination case described in Chapter 3 illustrates this process of fusion. A small boy was suffering from epilepsy, and the diviner consulted attributed the failure to cure him to a matrilineal ancestor who had accidentally shot himself while hunting for game in the bush. This ancestor, the diviner said, had afflicted the boy because some of his descendants, all Angolans, had shamelessly accused each other of being slaves. For both the diviner and the boy's father, who took the case for divining, the Angolan identity of the boy's relatives and the mentioning of slavery, both historical phenomena, were surely no mere trivialities; their priority, however, was to identify the affliction (the ancestor's accidental death) and its ultimate origin (the dissent and disrespect among relatives) because these rather customary phenomena were the ones that had to be addressed by ritual and therapeutic means if the boy was to recover. The ravages of the Angolan war and the politics of resettlement in Zambia were certainly real, well-known to all, and overpowering, but they did not change in any significant way the operational scope of basket divination, including the kind of predicaments considered, the divinatory procedure, the diagnoses offered, and the remedial measures prescribed.

This had not always been the case. During colonialism, the Luvale etiological pantheon had expanded considerably to include new kinds of afflicting agents and afflictions, all of which became represented in divination baskets. Some of these agents and afflictions, referred to by the same name—*sitima* (train), *ndeke* (plane), and *vindele* (Europeans)—were said to derive from contact with things non-African, from imported motorized vehicles in urban areas to Europeans. According to Charles White, a British colonial officer and an anthropologist, the curative ritual for *vindele* was "partially carried in a house in which articles of European material culture [had] been placed and the ritual meal [consisted] of Portuguese dishes such as fowl with rice, tomatoes and onions, and beer served in a bottle and drunk from a glass" (1961:50). A careful look at the *jipelo* articles will also reveal material traces of previous historical periods, suggesting that basket divination is a way of remembering the past (Blier 1995, Shaw 2002). Among the *jipelo* articles are coins dating from colonialism, cowrie shells transported from the Indian Ocean by Europeans, and even a wooden figure called Slave, Ndungo, which represents pre-colonial, African forms of slavery but exhibits chains or ropes around the neck, material representations of the Atlantic slave trade.

In 1990s Chavuma, however, the lipele baskets had no *jipelo* that bespoke directly or indirectly of contemporary politics. There were no material representations of war victims, war perpetrators, or war

refugees; no new additions to the etiological pantheon; and no verbal acknowledgment of the Angolan wars, forced displacement, or even the country of Angola in direct relation to the consulters' predicaments. In anthropology, material oracles have been described as microcosms of social life and, more recently, as repositories of social emotions and experiences (Graw 2009:105). Although we know that basket divination symbols are multireferential, their referents being highly autonomous and disclosing different truths new or old in different configurations (Turner 1975/1961:221), it is still perplexing, if not perturbing, that in the 1990s divination baskets lacked any material representation of things Angolan.

Maybe the Angolans sought in basket divination what they lacked in life—continuity. The value of cultural continuity is likely to increase proportionally to the level of social violence, and, in the 1990s, social violence in the border region had skyrocketed. Or maybe basket divination was an accomplice in the local environment of silence and fear, the experiences and emotions associated with Angola and life in exile being represented in the baskets not in the form of material objects but by the absence of material objects. Speaking of the Sakalava of Madagascar, Michael Lambek discusses the silencing of stories about spirits whose lives were associated with excessive acts of violence. "The sign of the truth of the story," he argues, "is not its retelling but its silence or the punishment that accompanies narration. . . . The difficulty of speaking about the past is a salient index of its significance" (1998:123). So is the difficulty of speaking about the present.

How, then, does one acknowledge change in the study of an activity that prioritizes continuity? My answer to this challenge is to situate the world of basket divination in its larger social, political, and historical context because such is the context in which the diviners, consulters, and I all met and in which they lived their lives. At the same time, however, much like the diviners, I prioritize basket divination as a way of dealing with the mundane miseries that divination has always helped people cope with: illness, reproductive problems, sexual impotence, and death. In the 1990s, suffering and adversity took many forms. My concern, however, is not to study these forms according to their cause, old or new, and much less their intensity, high or low, but to consider suffering through the lens of basket divination.

Narrative Threads

To convey the fluidity of personhood and thingness as they traverse physical boundaries (people and things) and realms of practice (ritual and secular), I have interwoven this book with two narrative threads: with one thread I draw on the narrative framework of field notes written during fieldwork to describe my experiences and process of data collection. Inspired by Kopytoff's biographical approach, I devoted part of my fieldwork to accompanying several divination baskets as they were born, as they became initiated, and as they died. It is this methodology, and the things and people it led me to, that this narrative thread describes.

I had originally intended to apprentice myself to a diviner. I wanted to learn by doing (rather than learning exclusively by tracing the biography of things, observing, and interviewing). The diviners, however, politely but firmly declined my request. Basket diviners are always men whose initiation into divination is forced on them by their ancestors. As a foreigner, I may have been perceived as gender-ambiguous and been taught valuable knowledge that no diviner would ever share with a local woman, but I was definitely not seen as a man. Neither was I perceived as a full member of their society, despite my adoption by two *manduna* headmen, *nduna* Maseka and *nduna* Mutonga, and christening with a Luvale name, Sombo. Diviners were willing to share some of their knowledge with me and allow me to attend some of their rituals, but formal apprenticeship was impossible.

For this reason, I had to rely more heavily than I had anticipated and wished on the classic methodological cycle: (1) observation of events, (2) recorded interviewing about those events, (3) transcription of interviews, (4) reading and interpretation of the transcribed interviews, and (5) further interviewing. I am very grateful to Henry Sawendele for his meticulous work of transcribing my tape-recorded interviews, and to the late Roy

Mbundu and Cedric Chikunga for their research assistance. Without them, it would have been impossible to overcome the initial suspicion that stiffened all meetings and to carry out conversations on esoteric topics that proved daunting to my moderate fluency in the Luvale language. Together, sometimes in the Luvale language and other times by translation into English, we learned much about basket divination. As I traced the cultural biography of particular baskets, as described earlier, I came to know some diviners better than others. I am deeply thankful to Sangombe, Sakutemba, Sanjamba, and Mutondo.

Most events described in this book took place between February and December 1996. I had arrived in Chavuma in May 1995, but it took time and perseverance to learn Luvale, a West Central Bantu language, familiarize myself with the highly esoteric world of basket divination, and receive permission to record rituals. The ritual of delivering the basket, which I describe in Chapter 1, and the ritual that initiates the new basket into a mature oracle, which I describe in Chapter 2, are only rarely performed. Neither has ever been documented.

In addition to the limitations imposed by language, social identity, and esoterism, I faced other challenges during my fieldwork. My relationship with diviners was inescapably affected by the political and economic realities already in place: international refugee law and the world's political and economic asymmetries. I was a young female from Portugal, the European country that had colonized Angola, and I had been living in the United States. All in all, I was simply another *chindele*, a white foreigner who had arrived uninvited, a threat to their safety and cultural entitlement. Other foreigners had been after their commodities; I was after their tradition (*chisemwa*).

A daughter of militant parents who in their youth had fought in Portugal to overthrow the dictatorship that had held Angola for so long, I could hardly identify with the ghastly image of the colonizer or the diamond smuggler. But I accepted the Angolans' standpoint and took up the burden of "my" history. I also accepted the limits of my fieldwork.

With my first narrative thread, I describe my fieldwork process and experiences; with my second, I trace my intellectual trajectory and discovery from the time of fieldwork to the time of writing. In the mid-1990s, I had left for Zambia determined to unveil how anthropomorphization (the continuum subject-object) played out in the specific sociocultural and historical context of Chavuma. I had planned to follow the cultural biography of divination baskets, a methodology that seemed consistent with the idea that divination baskets, being personified, have lives of their own. I had also anticipated corroborating commoditization theory, a theory that resonated well with my interest in fluidity (the opposite of the Positivist fixation on natural kinds) and provided me with both a method of data collection and a conceptual kit. Appadurai and Kopytoff had changed the study of material culture in the late 1980s, and I wanted to become a part of that historical turn.

Fieldwork showed me, however, that the strength of this theory is also its weakness. Commoditization theory hurried me along from village to village, it predisposed me to look backward to the origins of the *lipele* and forward to the future of the *lipele* and, in so doing, it disinclined me to pause, take a seat, observe, chat, and spend time with others. I struggled to mask my growing sense that commoditization theory overlooked the specificity of the *lipele* as a ritual entity and its historical and existential significance. In this book, I reconcile myself with my fieldwork experience and accept the analytical consequences of privileging life in its own right. In the same process, I also reconcile myself with the presence of Victor Turner in my work.

I confess that I never intended to restudy the sociocultural world that Turner encountered in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in the mid-1950s—true though it is that the Luvale, Chokwe, Luchazi, and Mbunda who reside in Chavuma are closely related to the Ndembu of Mwinilunga District, studied by Turner. All these groups (as well as the Lunda-Shinde who are often called Southern Lunda, together with the Ndembu) share a matrilineal and virilocal social organization, a similar cultural complex best known for the boys'

initiation ceremony, *mukanda*, and a common historical origin in Musumba, in what is now the southwestern corner of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Yet, both in the field and in writing, I often had the impression that I was conversing with Turner. His work on performance, liminality, ritual symbolism, color classification, rituals of affliction, and basket divination—most prominently in "Ndembu Divination: Its Symbolism and Techniques" (1975/1961) and "Muchona the Hornet, Interpreter of Religion" (1967/1959)—have inspired my thinking and writing in many ways. And although he came to refine his ideas in later years, it was in the Upper Zambezi, among the Ndembu, that they first blossomed.

With Turner in mind, who always intersected his interest in liminality with his interest in social dramas, I locate my book at the meeting point between ritual and everyday life. This is the point where the path of (de)commoditization leads to the liminal space of ritual, and the ritual-bound ontological continuum subject-object reaches over to everyday life, imbued with existential significance. Thingness and personhood are not essences arrested within the boundaries of different entities but endpoints of an ontological and existential continuum along which transient, contextualized expressions of objectification and personification arise. With MacGaffey, Kopytoff, and Appadurai, I suggest that we speak of processes—personification and objectification—instead of essences—persons and objects. Unlike them, however, I claim that such processes not only are inverted expressions of the same continuum but also are ontologically and existentially entangled. In other words, objectification and personification are intentionally activated in ritual so that objectified individuals attain de-objectification outside ritual. In 1990s Chavuma, this triangular continuum (personification of an object-objectification of a subject-and de-objectification of objectified subjects) became reflected in the social perception of basket divination as a way of doing, a way of knowing, and a way of making a living.

The risk of attributing reality to the methodologically justified pretense that a thing's significance lies in itself and not in social relationships—the risk of fetishizing what Appadurai calls "methodological fetishism" (1986a:5)—is ever present. Refusing to reduce the *lipele* to a mere reflection of the human mind, however defined, I show that the value of the personified object does not lie in itself but rather in contextual relation. Anthropomorphization is "relational and context-dependent, not classificatory and context free" (Gell 1998:22). Ontology goes hand in hand with intention, essence with appearance, reality with perception, and culture with history.

As a contribution to the study of divination systems and the continuum subject-object in the light of existential and historical contingencies, this book is a response to John Davis's cry to unite "the comfortable anthropology of social organization" to "the painful anthropology of disruption and despair" (1992:149). Today, the situation of the Angolan refugees in Zambia is no longer what it was prior to the end of the Angolan civil wars in 2002. Over 180,000 refugees have already returned to Angola, and it is estimated that by December 2011 there will be no more than 10,810 Angolan refugees remaining in Zambia (UNHCR 2009). I hope that this book testifies to the vitality and existential significance of an old cultural practice in the face of the catastrophic circumstances of the 1990s. Is not basket divination one way humanity was lived along the Angolan border?

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