

# Part IV

RE-CREATING THE PAST,  
PERFORMING THE FUTURE

## Bundu dia Kongo and Embodied Revolutions

*Performing Kongo Pride, Transforming Modern Society*

### Encounters and Embodied Revolutions

Saturday, February 18, 2006. On the way to an interview, I see a large group of people coming down the main road in Luozi. Carrying a five- or six-foot-tall painting of their leader, Ne Muanda Nsemi, they are members of Bundu dia Kongo (the Church of the Kongo, also known as BDK), singing, waving small branches with green leaves, and walking in time to the percussive sound of three bass drums and an *ngongi* being played by several men in the back of the group.<sup>1</sup> Some of the women wear highly recognizable yellow BDK head coverings. Many members of the crowd are carrying backpacks or sacks over their shoulders, on their backs, or on their heads, with food, blankets, and other items needed for an overnight stay for the two-day meeting. Previously, one of the local leaders of the group had told me there would be a general assembly from Friday to Sunday I could attend, and so I run to get my video camera. As I dash back, out of breath and panting, I open the camera to begin to film, assuming the people are members of the Luozi-based BDK group. Almost immediately, people in the crowd begin to protest and wave their arms erratically. I stop the camera, and several people approach me and began to fiercely throw questions my way.

“You have to ask for permission!” a tall man in a red shirt states emphatically.

“OK. OK. I’m sorry. Who do I ask?” I respond quickly, closing the camera and putting it back in my purse.

Another person chimes in, “Who are you and what are you doing filming?”

I anxiously reply, “I am a student working on my dissertation at the University of Michigan. I am a Black American from the United States. I am doing my research on Kongo culture and dance, from the Kongo Kingdom to the present day. I was given permission by the members of Bundu dia Kongo here in Luozi.”<sup>2</sup>

It turns out this group is actually from Kinshasa, not Luozi. So, they didn’t know me; thus, I am suspect. I explain my research and intentions several times to several different people. I reassure them that I am not a government or foreign spy. When the leader of this group from Kinshasa arrives, I explain everything to him. He gives me and several friends permission to film the group and tells us to come to the meeting area in the evening at 7:00 PM. My friend and assistant David runs ahead and films the group some more. Then, as I am waiting for him to come back, another group appears but something is going on. There is a tall, nonmember of the group in the middle, in dark tan khakis. As people argue and fuss around him, Mama Kudia and others watching near me begin to piece things together. Apparently, he was on a motorcycle and hit one of the people marching when he came through the crowd without beeping or giving advance notice. This person was hurt, and the other members of the group “arrested” him. It does not help that he isn’t MuKongo, but rather a Swahili speaker. They take his motorcycle and hold him “hostage” in the center of the group. I don’t know what they did with him. A friend said that they said they were going to take him to the authorities.

Later that evening, I arrive with two friends at the meeting site to observe the proceedings. A soccer field–sized clearing is filled with men, women, and children, all facing a small area of ground acting as the stage, located just in front of a thatch covered structure where group leaders and honored guests are seated in chairs. A musical group performs to the left of the stage. The music is infectious and sounds like Congolese popular dance music with lyrics espousing BDK’s ideas and politics. If I close my eyes, I could swear I am listening to Werreson!<sup>3</sup> I note that curious nonmembers of BDK, attracted by the singing and thronging crowd, walk by leisurely or stand at the fringes of the clearing, observing the goings on. Many BDK security personnel (known as *makesa*), in blue uniforms with red berets and armbands, surround the open space in the middle. I approach a “welcome” desk where dues were collected, and ask for the local leaders with whom I am acquainted, explaining to the security people that we had been given permission to attend.

They said wait, you have to see the chief. Then, a serious escort leads us to a small house, where several men in sunglasses, tight pants, and serious faces guard the door, with arms crossed. They again tell me to wait, and finally, who emerges? Ne Mosi, whom I'd interviewed several months before. We exchange pleasantries, and I explain that I am asking for permission to film.

"How can I give you permission to film, and you still haven't given me the film and pictures you took last time?"

The skeptical look he gives me is not helping matters. I am frustrated and a bit annoyed. By that point, it seemed as though everyone at every event I attended expected that I would print every last one of the pictures I took and give it to them. Most people in the area had nondigital cameras, and a local shop printed those photos. Since I was using a digital camera in an area where facilities for digital printing were scarce, it was hard to fulfill such requests immediately, although I gave VCDs and CDs of events and photos to people, and actual photos when I had the chance to print them out.

"It depends on you," I respond.

"I will give permission, but on the condition that you give us a copy of the pictures and photos that you take, and the other ones you took already."

I said, "If you give me a blank CD, I can do the copy of the photos and other film right now!"

After he responds that he did not have a CD, I explain that I can do this in Kinshasa, as I didn't have any more CDs with me in Luozi. We agree that I will give the copies to his wife. After finally getting his permission to film, my two friends and I walk back to the open area. However, when I open my video camera, yet another leader stops me and tells me that I need his permission to film. This happens several times over and over again, and, after at least an hour and a half, I am finally allowed to film. Looking back on the experience, I realize a few factors were at play: other BDK groups visiting Luozi did not know who I was and were suspicious; BDK members in general knew that the government was persecuting them and feared I was spying on them; moreover, BDK leaders wanted me to take their movement seriously and not approach it as simply an object of study to be filmed, photographed, and analyzed. Thus, my interactions with BDK were some of the most challenging moments that I experienced while doing research. To put it simply, BDK often told me "No!" when other groups did not. However, these interactions also taught me the biggest lessons about the power differentials, politics of conducting research, and expectations of my relationship as a researcher with various community members.

Seated among the honored guests with two friends who accompanied me, I face the crowd, seeing men and women dressed in security uniforms placed

at intermittent points not only to maintain order, but also as I have realized from visits to their *zikua*,<sup>4</sup> to warn of possible attacks by government and police forces. The crowd continues to grow, spilling over past the clearing, as members have come from Boma, Matadi, Mbanza-Ngungu, Kinshasa, and other places in the Lower Congo especially.<sup>5</sup> As the meeting gets under way, I stand when everyone else stands, kneel when everyone kneels, and generally act as a silent participant-observer of the events. When I feel more comfortable, I leave the space of the honored guests, begin to record the meeting, and take photos. Several iconic images are strategically placed around the stage area. One is a painting of Mama Vita Kimpa,<sup>6</sup> majestically posed in front of roaring flames that took her life on July 2, 1706, anachronistically depicted wearing one of the female BDK yellow head coverings discussed earlier. Another image is of Ne Muanda Nsemi, three paintings of whom animate the stage, as he was unable to attend the meeting. During a lull in the program, I approach the most elaborate of these paintings for a close-up. At the top are the words “Ne Muanda Nsemi, the Vehicle of Kongo Wisdom, the Kongo Nationalist Movement,” and at the bottom is a sketch of a map showing a restored Kongo Kingdom. However, what is even more interesting to me is the image of Ne Muanda Nsemi himself. In the painting, he is depicted in a black suit with a red scarf tied around his forehead, with his right hand slightly cupped and raised over his left hand, which has two scarves (yellow and blue) draped over it. In this and the other three paintings, he is thus shown enacting the *bula makonko* gesture (see figure 6.1). What does gesture have to do with the politics of *Bundu dia Kongo*?<sup>7</sup>

This chapter explores ever-evolving relationships between nationalist politics, religion, and everyday performances for Kongo people in the context of a postcolonial and post-Mobutu nation. I examine the use of embodied cultural performances in the politico-religious-nationalist movement of *Bundu dia Kongo*. Their activism has led to the two-time election of their spiritual leader as a national congressman (in 2006 and 2011), and their political engagement and overall challenge to the status quo has sparked numerous confrontations (often fatal) with local, provincial, and national law enforcement and military, capturing national and even international headlines. The government dissolved and prohibited *Bundu dia Kongo* as an organization by an official decree in 2008, and the group reorganized itself as a political party *Bundu dia Mayala*, which was also banned in 2011. This chapter is based on my experiences with the group in 2005–6, before their major conflicts with the state in 2007 and 2008. For *Bundu dia Kongo*, embodied



FIGURE 6.1. Still video image of painting of Ne Muanda Nsemi doing bula makonko gesture, Luozi, 2006. Image captured by Yolanda Covington-Ward.

gestures have come to play a huge role in the marshaling of popular sentiment and spiritual power toward the social and political goal of creating a sovereign Kongo nation. Changes in the ways the members use their bodies in their interactions with each other, other Kongo people, and the spiritual realm, and the meanings associated with these embodied cultural performances, call our attention to the importance of the body in advancing ideologies and political goals and establishing other forms of authority that subvert the prevailing status quo. Culturally relevant gestures take on multiple meanings and uses as they enable the very embodiment of the overall cultural and political mission of Bundu dia Kongo.

### **Conflicted Feelings: The Decision to Write about Bundu dia Kongo**

Initially, I did not intend to write about Bundu dia Kongo. In fact, when I left my last BDK event in February of 2006, I stated emphatically to my friends, “Je suis fini avec BDK!” (I am finished with BDK!) I was angry at all the accusations that were continuously leveled at me of being a spy although I had done all I could to alleviate their suspicions. I was upset at the almost schizophrenic behavior of being embraced as a sister of the diaspora whose research in Kongo performance culture and history aligned with their goal

of revitalizing Kongo culture, to then being ridiculed for not doing more to support the group and for attending other Christian churches, and even being denounced as a spy because I hadn't brought hard copies of pictures I'd taken although I'd given them CDs and VCDs with the photos and video footage. I was threatened that I would be spiritually attacked if my motives were impure, and I avoided their more overtly political activities not only because I didn't want to be explicitly associated with the group during a tension-filled election campaign season, but also because of the potential for violent conflicts with police. I argued with them over what I saw as historical facts they'd creatively rewritten and was told, "You got that from a white man's book. That is not the truth. Read the black man's book!" Coming from a family where strong women reign and females dominate numerically, I bristled at their ideas of inherent male superiority and rolled my eyes in defiance as I was told what my "proper" role as a woman should be.<sup>8</sup> To be candid, their overall aggressive attitude and even militarism frightened me although simultaneously they often reminded me of Black Power groups in the United States like the Black Panthers, whom I respected. When the memory card in my camera failed at the February mass meeting, I came back just as the crowd dispersed. I then asked a leader's permission to take photos of some of the remaining banners and signs, and the general area, and he refused. "Why do you want photos with no people in them? This is not a museum!" Frustrated, I complied and left the area, vowing to never deal with them again. In the moment, I felt they didn't respect my work as a researcher; yet, conversely, they wanted me to see them as a valid movement with aspirations, and not just as objects of scientific study.

In addition, friends and community members made it clear to me that working with BDK could put me at risk of harm. Ever since first talking with BDK leadership in September of 2005, people had warned me about the group, saying things like, "Bundu dia Kongo, they're dangerous," and "You have to be careful—people have been killed." Thus, I was apprehensive and wary about the group, because of the warnings I'd received, the overall aggressive tone of the group, and the hostile response they continued to receive from the local authorities. I didn't want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Owing to my conflicted feelings about writing about the group and concerns for my safety, I did only a few interviews with local group leaders, only one of which was recorded because of their suspicion of recording equipment, while I took notes during the other interviews. Most of the data this chapter is built on is based on those interviews and other informal conversations with BDK members, along with my experiences as an observing participant in several worship sessions in the zikua in Luozi, a multiday mass

meeting, and several other organized events. Moreover, I incorporate the numerous published writings of Ne Muanda Nsemi, which guide the ideology and development of the group as a whole. In all, when I look back on my experiences, I realize that although I didn't always like it, the members of Bundu dia Kongo continuously challenged my motives, privilege, and position as a Black American woman ethnographer who until then had not had much trouble gaining access and permissions for events in other settings.<sup>9</sup>

Although I did not agree with some of the points of view and ideology of Bundu dia Kongo, and even their tactics and behavior at times, as a member of the African diaspora, I was unequivocally in agreement with, or at least sympathized with a number of their principles. Their emphasis on a religion that is Kongo focused, their mission to rehabilitate the use of Kikongo, their need for a history written by and for Kongo people, their goal of self-government and the erasure of colonial borders, their belief in Pan-Africanism, their recognition of the ill treatment of people of African descent all over the world by Europeans and their descendants including slavery and colonialism—all these principles struck a chord within me.

Regardless of my reservations, I have decided to include BDK in this book for several reasons. First, there hasn't been much scholarly attention paid to the group, especially in English-language publications, although the group has been in existence for several decades.<sup>10</sup> For this reason I have dedicated a large portion of the chapter to explaining who Bundu dia Kongo is as a movement. Second, BDK members were the target of a fatal state suppression campaign in 2007 and 2008, which impacted many communities in Bas-Congo, including Luozi. Third and most important, as I reflected on their influence in politics, the revitalization of Kongo culture and language, and finally, the redefinition of Kongo cultural performances in terms of gestures in everyday life, I realized I could not write about the relationship between nationalism, religion, and the body in modern Kongo society without talking about Bundu dia Kongo.

### **Post-Mobutu Congo**

After Laurent Kabila's overthrow of Mobutu in 1997 and Kabila's subsequent assassination in 2001, a transitional government was formed, headed by his son, Joseph Kabila. The Democratic Republic of Congo stood poised at the precipice of an uncertain future. For the first time since June 30, 1960, free democratic elections were finally going to be held in 2006.<sup>11</sup> This new environment engendered fear and wariness about the future, but also hope and numerous opportunities for challenging existing political authority structures. This was directly reflected in the large number of registered political

parties and independent candidates (there were 267) several months before the presidential elections,<sup>12</sup> parties with numerous agendas and visions for the future, intent on transforming the nation that had become a decrepit shadow of its former self, economically, structurally, politically, and culturally. However, this urge to transform was not limited to politics but also existed in other aspects of Congolese society and manifested itself in myriad ways.

The Bundu dia Kongo movement has appeared in a number of Congolese newspaper headlines over the past decade, especially as their political activity has increased. Some examples include “Ne Muanda Nsemi, Elected Member of the National Assembly from Luozi, Called to Reaffirm Peace in Bas-Congo” (Agence Congolaise de Presse 2008); “Terror at Luozi and Seke-Banza: Bundu dia Kongo Challenges the Authority of the State!” (Uhuru 2008); and “Arrest of Twenty Members of ‘Bundu dia Mayala,’ the Banned Former Politico-military Group ‘Bundu dia Kongo’” (Agence Congolaise de Presse 2012). Notwithstanding the fact that many of the newspapers do not agree with the group’s politics and ideology, and often sensationalize the news they report, Bundu dia Kongo has reappeared over and over again in and around political issues in the Lower Congo, with their conflicts with authorities even leading to an expansion of the United Nations military presence in Bas-Congo in 2008.<sup>13</sup> What is Bundu dia Kongo? What are their politics and ideology, and how are they related to embodied cultural performance? The first section of this chapter will examine the goals and ideology of this group. The second section provides a historical and diasporic context for Bundu dia Kongo by exploring the antecedents of the group’s political and sociocultural activism (in particular, the importance of ABAKO), and the role of Pan-Africanism in the movement. Finally, the third section of the chapter will discuss how bodies are used to physically enact Bundu dia Kongo’s goals through embodied cultural performances, particularly in gestures associated with both everyday interactions and spiritual collective worship.

### **What Is Bundu dia Kongo?**

Bundu dia Kongo is a group and movement that combines religion, politics, and cultural revitalization in furthering the overall goal of restoring the former Kongo Kingdom. Composed of BisiKongo people (which members of BDK refer to as Bena Kongo), it was founded in 1986 in the Democratic Republic of Congo by Ne Muanda Nsemi, who remains the spiritual leader of the group. Born Badiégisa Zakalia in Mongo-Luala,<sup>14</sup> a northern sector in the territory of Luozi, he received a spiritual calling to continue the work of the famous colonial-era Kongo prophet Simon Kimbangu (see chapters 2 and 3). In a newspaper interview, Ne Muanda Nsemi explained he was called to take

on a mission in 1969 while in his third year at Lovanium University studying math, physics, and chemistry: “I began to have visions. For someone who, in his youth, saw only math, physics, and chemistry, and who had never prayed, it was a whole other world. I began to see a giant being who measured more or less four meters. And this being came . . . to tell me: ‘Vakatukidi nganga, nganga uvingananga vana’” (this means: here where a chief/priest retired, another chief/priest must take the place). And he goes on to add: ‘Here is the mission that you are going to take on. It is going to now be your turn. But you, you will be at the same time a mixture of Kimbangu and Kasa-Vubu’” (Kabuayi 2006).<sup>15</sup>

Ne Muanda Nsemi describes denying this call for seventeen years before accepting his mission and founding Bundu dia Kongo in 1986. The visions Ne Muanda Nsemi reports having continue a long tradition of continuous revelation that permeates Kongo culture and history, in both traditional religious beliefs and Christian practices, from the possession of Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita by Saint Anthony in the eighteenth century, to Simon Kimbangu’s own visions in the twentieth century (Thornton 1998). Notably, the otherworldly being in the vision places Ne Muanda Nsemi in the same category as other powerful Kongo leaders and cultural heroes, such as Simon Kimbangu and Joseph Kasa-Vubu. Inspired by the visions, what objectives does Ne Muanda Nsemi and Bundu dia Kongo as a group and movement seek to fulfill?

### Mission and Ideology

Bundu dia Kongo’s overall mission was described in one of the many pamphlets written by Ne Muanda Nsemi as the following: “the diffusion of the Kongo religion, the promotion of scientific research, and the moral and spiritual education of political leaders of the country practicing the Kongo Religion” (1994a). The overall ideology of Bundu dia Kongo can best be encapsulated through a discussion of trinities,<sup>16</sup> so when I asked about the teachings of Bundu dia Kongo, one interviewee explained that the essential teachings of BDK were threefold: spiritual, scientific, and political. Each aspect of the group’s ideology is associated with particular colors, ancestors, and characteristics. A similar type of trinity is reflected in the concept of God in BDK (Ne Mosi, October 10, 2005). God (in Kikongo called *Nzambi Mpungu*) is one but has three principle attributes: power (*Nzambi ‘a Mpungu*); love (*Nzambi ‘a Kongo*); and intelligence (*Nzambi ‘a Mbumba*) (Nsemi 1994b, 2–3; Nsemi 1995, 6). According to the teachings of BDK as espoused in their pamphlets,<sup>17</sup> small books, newspaper interviews, and interviews I myself conducted, these three attributes correspond to the three children of the primordial ancestors who became the Bena Kongo, or Kongo people:

1. The ancestor Nsaku was a prophet, great priest, religion, spirituality, the color blue, divine love, the spiritual church, Kinlongo kia Kongo, Mfumu'a Nlongo. 2. The ancestor Mpanzu was a blacksmith, artisan, sciences and technology, the color yellow, divine intelligence, the academy of sciences, Kinkimba kia Mazayu, Mfumu'a Lusanga. 3. The Ancestor Nzinga was a king, the government, the color red, divine power, the political party, Kabu dia Mayala, Mfumu'a Mayala. The names of these three children became the names of the three clans at the base of the Kongo Nation: the clan Nsaku, the clan Mpanzu, and the clan Nzinga. . . . The ancestor Nsaku is the incarnation of the love and the wisdom of God. The ancestor Mpanzu is the incarnation of the creative intelligence of God. The ancestor Nzinga is the incarnation of the power of God that governs the universe. The Kongo trinity is thus the representative, on the earth, of the trinity of the skies. It is the chosen people made in the image of God. (Ne Muanda Nsemi 1995, 11–13)

According to Ne Muanda Nsemi, the name of the *kanda*, or clan, of each person can be traced back to one of these three founding ancestors, and people's own individual attributes will reflect that association (for example, if they have a propensity for music, this can be traced to their belonging to one of the clans of Mpanzu).<sup>18</sup> All these ideas and associations have been captured in the following phrase in Kikongo: *Makuku Matatu Malamba Kongo*: the three hearthstones on which the Kongo was prepared/cooked.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, two of these trinities (Nzambi 'a Mpungu, Nzambi 'a Kongo, Nzambi 'a Mbumba) and (Nsaku, Mpanzu, Nzinga) are arranged on top of one another to form a six-pointed star that is the emblem of Bundu dia Kongo as a movement (see figure 6.2).<sup>20</sup>

The influence of the trinities of God and the characteristics of the three major ancestors are thus reflected in defining what Bundu dia Kongo is, as shown in Ne Muanda Nsemi's response to a question about the nature of Bundu dia Kongo in a newspaper interview: "Bundu dia Kongo is in effect a crystal with three faces: when you look at Bundu dia Kongo on the face of the ancestor Nsaku, you say that Bundu dia Kongo is a church. But when you look at the face of the ancestor Mpanzu, you find that it is technology, applied science. Bundu dia Kongo is thus an institute of scientific research. And when you go to look at Bundu dia Kongo on the face of the ancestor Nzinga, it becomes politics because the king is political" (Kabuyayi 2006).

With this knowledge, the painting of Ne Muanda Nsemi discussed at the beginning of the chapter makes even more sense; he wears the color red on his forehead because he belongs to the Nzinga clan and thus is a leader and



FIGURE 6.2. Still video image of Bundu dia Kongo flag with six-pointed star emblem, Luozi, 2006. Image captured by Yolanda Covington-Ward.

engaged in politics. Yet, he holds the blue and yellow scarves, indicating he is also powerful spiritually as the leader of the movement, and is well regarded intellectually as well, as the author of numerous pamphlets and small books on Kongo culture and history, and the mission and ideology of Bundu dia Kongo. The next section of this chapter shall briefly examine the three major “faces” of Bundu dia Kongo.

### Spiritual Teachings

In the spiritual teachings of BDK, an ancestral Kongo religion called BuKongo is privileged. In this religion, a spiritual hierarchy exists where a supreme being rests at the top, who is the same for all races and people, who BDK members call Nzambi or Ne Kongo Kalunga (Nsemi 1994a, 3). Beneath the supreme being is a grouping of beings in a celestial hierarchy who again serve all humanity. Beneath them is the “supervisory genie” of the Kongo people, as each nation or grouping of people has their own. Then, lowest in the spiritual hierarchy are divinized ancestors of the Kongo people (*mvidi bakulu*) (Nsemi 1994a, 2). Thus, the prayers of the Kongo people are believed to go up through each level of the spiritual hierarchy before reaching Nzambi: “En route to God, man passes obligatorily through the first bridge that is made

up of his divinized ancestors. The second bridge through which he passes is constituted by the supervisory genie of his nationality, and at last through all the great celestial hierarchies devoted to the service of God” (Nsemi 1994a, 2).

In the religion of BuKongo, Christianity is scorned. This is significant because the vast majority of people in the DRC are Christian, and mostly Catholic. The members of Bundu dia Kongo see Christianity as a religion created by and for *mundele*, or white people. According to another interviewee, when a Kongo person prays, the prayers go first to divinized ancestors, such as Simon Kimbangu or Dona Kimpa Vita. Then, these divinized ancestors carry the message on to Ne Muanda Kongo, the archangel and supervisor of the Kongo people, who then carries it to Tata Nzambi Mpungu, who is the highest God.<sup>21</sup> The important role both Simon Kimbangu and Kimpa Vita play as divinized ancestors can also be seen in the lyrics of many of the songs performed in worship. The following is one such example that I observed in Luozi:

Song in Kikongo

Oh, Mfumu Kimbangu wiza  
Oh, Ya Kimpa Vita wiza  
Wiza kunguna  
Mansangaza mu meso meto  
Oh, lu babosono  
Mansanga lwiza kumuna  
Mu meso meto

Song in English

Oh, Mfumu Kimbangu come  
Oh, Ya Kimpa Vita come  
Come wipe  
The tears from our eyes  
Oh, everyone  
You all come wipe the tears  
From our eyes

This song is an appeal to both Kimbangu and Kimpa Vita, major Kongo prophets who have a huge influence on modern Kongo culture and thought. Another notable fact in explaining BDK’s constant use of these two prophets is both of them were connected to nationalist movements: Kimpa Vita in advocating for a Catholicism that privileged the perspectives of the Kongo people and for trying to restore a fractured Kongo Kingdom, and Kimbangu, whose movement was eventually associated with calls for independence from

Belgian colonialism. Thus, in invoking these prophets, BDK is connecting their own nationalist movement to famous nationalist movements of the past.

In all, BDK advocates a return to a traditional Kongo religion based on the Kongo people and their experience. One such example of this is the sacred book of BDK. It is called *MaKongo* or *Makaba* and was written by Ne Muanda Nsemi, who was inspired by visions, communications, and revelations from the ancestors. With this sacred book, Ne Muanda Nsemi seeks to establish written legitimacy of his ideas and BuKongo as a religion. He challenges the hegemony of other sacred books such as the Bible, which many people accept as unquestionable truth, but was also written by people inspired by visions and revelations.

### **Scientific Mission**

The scientific (or cultural) teachings of BDK revolve around a revitalization of Kongo culture and history. The centerpiece of activities in this vein is the privileging of the use of the Kikongo language. For BDK members, Kikongo is the preferred language for everyday conversation, speeches, and community worship. Members drop any European names and privilege their Kikongo names. Men also place the word “Ne” in front of their names as a male honorific term, like the use of “Mr.” or “Sir” in English, and women are referred to as “Ma,” which is a term already in common use (I was referred to as Ma Londa or Mama Londa by most of the people I came in contact with in Luozi, whether members of BDK or not). The speaking of French or other languages of the Congo, such as Lingala—the dominant language in Kinshasa and in the popular music scene—is discouraged. The women in BDK don’t wear pants, makeup, or hair extensions or wigs. Polygamy is authorized as one of many ways to return to traditional, precolonial practices. This stands out because official polygyny is rare in the DRC, perhaps because it was extremely discouraged and actively combated by missionaries during the colonial period, and was taxed and then restricted by the Belgian government. The use of drugs is also not condoned, and periods of sexual abstinence are required for those people who are very spiritually advanced in the group (Ne Mosi, October 10, 2005).<sup>22</sup>

### **Political Strivings**

Bundu dia Kongo is most well known for their political activities. The political teachings of BDK have one central objective: the reunification and rebuilding of the Kongo Kingdom as a separate nation-state. The major goal of BDK is to have sovereignty over the area that during the precolonial period made up the Kongo Kingdom and its surrounding areas, including parts of

Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola (and even Gabon in some BDK writings). Members of BDK call this area Kongo dia Ntotela. The Kongo people were split into these different political entities during the colonial period. The group advocates their reunification based not only on righting past colonial wrongs, but also on satisfying the will of God.

The politics of Bundu dia Kongo . . . must first be a politics that must be in accordance with the law of nature, the law of God. That is to say, first to do all to accomplish the will of God, this politics must be in accordance with divine law. Thus, we for example, the Kongo people, it is God that created us, so that we are BaKongo. And the colonialists came and divided us. The BaKongo were divided in three countries, Angola, Belgian Congo, French Congo. Whereas . . . God in his will had created one people. Then, it was the colonial politics that go against divine will. And, it is for that reason that Bundu dia Kongo, to rehabilitate, to conform to the will of God, searches to reunify that which God had created united, that is to say, the reunification of the Kongo people. (Ne Mosi, October 10, 2005)

Thus, Bundu dia Kongo's goal of the reunification of the Kongo people is based on erasing arbitrary colonial divisions and also finds authority in the spiritual will of God, who is said to have originally created a unitary Kongo people. In this way, Bundu dia Kongo is able to put forth spiritual backing for their political mission.

Sovereignty is a huge issue for BDK members, who insist that Kongo people rule over their own land. Currently, as Bas-Congo is still a part of the DRC, BDK members protest people from other provinces who are not Bena Kongo having positions of power in Bas-Congo. These cultural foreigners usually don't speak Kikongo and members of BDK see them as ineffective leaders who can't understand how to govern in Bas-Congo, and whose political authority shouldn't be respected or acknowledged because they are not Kongo people. A recent example of this was BDK challenges to the gubernatorial elections in Bas-Congo, when Simon Mbtashi Mbatshia (a candidate who some Kongo people saw as loyal to non-Kongo interests) and Déo Nkusu, his running mate for vice/deputy governor, were declared the winners in an extremely close race with Léonard Fuka Unzola and Ne Muanda Nsemi, who of course had the support of BDK (Mona 2007). Clashes with police forces during BDK protests and marches throughout the Lower Congo led to more than one hundred deaths in late January and early February of 2007, followed by other confrontations (Mabandu 2008). Before this, people were killed on both sides in numerous incidents of violence in confrontations between BDK and

police or military forces sent to quell protests and restore order (although the vast majority of the fatalities were BDK members).

The first major victory for Bundu dia Kongo in the political arena was in a competitive election in 2006 when Ne Muanda Nsemi won the sole seat in the National Assembly to represent the territory of Luozi. This became a springboard for his subsequent bid for vice governor in 2007, and then his subsequent reelection to the National Assembly in 2011, this time representing Kinshasa. All of this demonstrates the growing political power of Bundu dia Kongo as a movement, a point we will return to later in this chapter. In all, for members of Bundu dia Kongo, the history of economic exploitation and violence that characterized the colonial period was further exacerbated by the marginalization of Kongo people in a postcolonial society. In a country where politics are still organized around ethnic allegiances, the Kongo people have not been able to garner any major political clout, not since the election of Joseph Kasa-Vubu as the first president of a newly independent Congo in 1960. Moreover, the Lower Congo province is still a mainly rural province (outside of the major towns dotting the railway and main road between Kinshasa and the port city of Matadi), which has not experienced much development since independence. Thus for many Kongo people, Bundu dia Kongo is an effective tool to address these social and political disparities.

### **Bundu dia Kongo Organization, Membership, and Reception**

In his description of an organizational structure that can be used to develop reformulated Pan-African religions across the world, Ne Muanda Nsemi discusses members of religions being organized into “prayer and research groups” rather than churches: “These groups are not churches; they are centers of research charged with gathering, in each nationality (in each tribe), the materials that constitute the doctrine of the Negro African Church, of which the Kongo religion is the principal axis” (1994a, 11). More specifically, these groups are called *zikua* (*mazikua* in plural) (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1999, 217; Nsemi 1994a, unnumbered page). In regards to the membership of the BDK movement, according to Wamba-dia-Wamba, in 1994, there were close to fifty thousand members in around five hundred *mazikua* (1999, 217). More than a decade later, in 2005–6, although I did not get any estimate of the membership, the numbers at the time were likely growing as the movement gained popularity.

So far, this chapter has discussed the reception (or lack thereof) of the Bundu dia Kongo movement by the government, police, and military forces as evidenced by the numerous conflicts and fatalities. Evidently, BDK’s growing calls for sovereignty and political power threaten many groups and insti-

tutions. Yet, what do other Kongo people who are not members of Bundu dia Kongo think of the group and movement?

In my conversations with Kongo people in both Kinshasa and Luozi, the overwhelming sense I got was that many Kongo people applauded the call for political power, the revitalization of Kongo culture, and the recognition of important Kongo cultural heroes. The goal of reforming the Kongo Kingdom also was seen as a positive, for the most part. People often said that Bundu dia Kongo was saying publicly the things that many Kongo people thought themselves. However, the point where many Kongo people tended to diverge from the group was on religion. Many BisiKongo who were not members of Bundu dia Kongo berated the group for its derision of Jesus Christ and Christianity. In fact, there have been several instances of physical confrontations between Bundu dia Kongo members and members of Christian churches.<sup>23</sup> However, the possibility of larger political and ethnonational goals overriding religious loyalties can be seen in the results of both elections of Ne Muanda Nsemi to the National Assembly.

### **Before Slavery, Christianity, and Colonialism: History in BDK Politics**

October 9, 2005. Today I am going to the Bundu dia Kongo zikua in Luozi. Ne Zole comes to get me about fifteen minutes after 9:00 AM, and David goes with me. We walk to the church, which is a brown thatch and stick structure, with a thatch roof as well (see figure 6.3). People have their shoes off, and when I finally sit down and remove my shoes, two guys come around to collect everyone's shoes and put them outside.

The seats are elevated wooden slats that form benches, and I notice immediately the men on one side and the women on the other side, like in the DMNA church. I count those in attendance several times throughout the service, and the numbers are something like this: twenty-four adult men, eleven adult women, and fifteen children and teenagers, including six boys, and nine girls. Men are definitely in the majority, contrasting vividly with the congregations I have observed in the DMNA, CEC, and even Kimbanguist churches in Luozi. There is a desk in the front center of the space, with three cups on it, red, blue, and yellow, to represent Nsaku, Mpanzu, Nzinga (religion, science, and politics). Underneath the desk are three baskets, red, green (supposed to be blue), and yellow, and when the offering takes place, people place their money or gift in the basket that corresponds to their ancestral clan.<sup>24</sup> The man leading the session is seated behind the desk, and there are chairs on either side of him, and Ne Zole sits in one of the chairs. I sit on the side in a more gender-neutral space. As an invited guest, Ne Zole asks me to stand



FIGURE 6.3. Bundu dia Kongo zikua, Luozi, 2005. Photo by Yolanda Covington-Ward.

and introduces me to the congregation. A small group of people comes to the front of the church, and as I continue to stand, they sing a song composed in my honor. I include the text below, first in French then in English:

#### Song in French

I.

En Egypt, ils étaient nos esclaves  
 Ces Européens qui envient toujours nos richesses  
 Au point de se réunir et se partager l'Afrique  
 Voilà la source de notre malheur!

(refrain)

Du partage de l'Afrique commençaient nos souffrances  
 Notre ancêtre Nzinga fût enterrée vivante,  
 Yaya Vita-Kimpa notre sœur jetée vivante au feu!  
 Tandis qu'ils ont condamné à mort notre grand prophète Kimbangu.  
 Oh! Quel enfer pour toi noir qui se dit (éparse?) de Jésus?  
 Qu'as-tu fait du mal pour mériter ce sort?  
 Uniquement parce que Dieu te donne un pays riche!  
 Et toi albinos qui t'a donné l'Europe?  
 Rentre chez-toi, je t'en prie  
 Ramène avec toi les armes et ta bible.

II.

Ils ont amené des fusils pour tuer les noirs  
La bible et leur religion nous a été imposée par la force,  
A grand prix ils ont vendu les noirs  
Nos objets d'art et autres biens prétendus (impie, impie)!

III.

Dans leurs belles maisons, une fortune sale  
Fruits de leurs vols et de l'exploitation des noirs  
Du fond en comble, ils pillé notre pays,  
N'est-ce pas qu'ils disent que voler c'est un péché!

### Song in English

I.

In Egypt, they were our slaves  
These Europeans who envied all of our riches  
To the point of meeting and dividing up Africa  
There is the source of our misfortune!  
(refrain)  
With the dividing up of Africa our suffering began  
Our ancestor Nzinga was buried alive  
Yaya Vita-Kimpa our sister thrown live into the fire!  
While they condemned to death our great prophet Kimbangu  
Oh! What hell for you black person who tells himself to hope in Jesus?  
What wrong did you do to deserve this fate?  
Only because God gives you a rich country!  
And you albinos what has Europe given you?  
Go back home, would you please  
Take back with you the weapons and your Bible

II.

They brought guns in order to kill Black people  
The Bible and their religion were imposed upon us by force  
At a high price they sold Black people  
Our objects of art and other goods laid claim to (ungodly, ungodly)

III.

In their beautiful homes, a dirty fortune  
Fruits of their thefts and the exploitation of Black people  
From top to bottom, they pillage our country  
Isn't it true that they say that stealing is a sin!

This song reveals the importance of understanding and using history for BDK's larger goals. Evidently, while portraying some of the key ideological

elements of *Bundu dia Kongo*, the composer(s) of the song are also trying to connect with my identity as an African American. My positionality is particularly important in that not only was the song composed for me (the hastily scribbled words were handed to me on a piece of paper at the end of the song) but it was also written in French, since my hosts knew my Kikongo was limited. This stands out as members of *Bundu dia Kongo* make a concerted effort to speak in Kikongo as opposed to other languages. As a “sister” of the African diaspora (and potentially the Kongo diaspora as they explained to me) and student of Kongo culture and history, they clearly expected many of the themes in the song to resonate with my own experiences and sentiments, which they did.

This song directly critiques Christianity and injustices dealt out by European perpetrators. Treachery and hypocrisy on the part of Europeans are contrasted with African suffering at their hands and nostalgia for a great African past before their arrival. The song chronicles the unjust deaths of divinized ancestors such as Simon Kimbangu and Vita Kimpa, the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, the parceling of the African continent at the Berlin conference and thefts, violence, and exploitation that defined subsequent European colonization in Africa. These stand in stark relief against Christianity, a religion that supposedly stands for peace and love, and yet, “the Bible and the gun” often worked hand and hand in oppressing native populations during the colonial period.

The opening line, “In Egypt, they were our slaves,” references a longing for a past when relative positions of authority were reversed. It also establishes a kinship bond with the great civilization of Egypt, a point expounded on considerably in writings of Ne Muanda Nsemi and in the sacred book *Makongo*, which discusses the migration of the founders of the Kongo Kingdom from Egypt. The suffering of Africans, which continues in the present, is juxtaposed with the riches and relative comfort Europeans have gained through slavery and colonization, and continue to gain through the exploitation of Africa’s natural resources. The song ties directly into many of the goals of *Bundu dia Kongo*: to have Kongo people reject Christianity, which members of BDK see as a white man’s religion used to oppress them; to have Kongo people govern not only Kongo people but historically Kongo land so they benefit from its vast resources; and to re-form and re-create the Kongo Kingdom that was so divided by arbitrary colonial boundaries. These political claims to sovereignty and land are not made without justification; in fact, BDK strategically employs a history of a magnificent past to bolster its claims in the present.

In BDK there is a particular narrative of the origins and migration of the Bena Kongo connecting the Kongo people to great civilizations and thus sup-

porting claims for sovereignty in the present. This narrative greatly differs from largely accepted histories of the Bantu Migration from the Cameroon/Nigeria area down into central and southern Africa. According to Ne Muanda Nsemi, the Bena Kongo come from a fascinating union. Beings from space (*bana ba zulu*) came from the planet KaKongo and descended into Ethiopia. There, they intermarried with the *Bana ba Tumi*, people coming from India, and gave birth to the primordial ancestors, and in turn, the Kongo people. According to a passage from the sacred book *Makaba*, Nzambi passed on a powerful message to the Bena Kongo:

101. You are my elected people  
Your first ancestors came from space  
But you, you were born in Ethiopia  
102. I brought you to Egypt  
Now I make you leave Egypt  
And I send you far beyond Ethiopia. . . .  
104. You will inhabit the Promised Land  
Of a great king, the great Mani Kongo  
Who will come from the sky, from space  
105. It is here that the prophecies will be fulfilled. . . .  
The light that will rehabilitate the world  
Will come from Kongo dia Ntotela (quoted in Nsemi 1994b, 2–3)

According to BDK, the journey of the Bena Kongo began in Ethiopia and eventually ended in West Central Africa (see figure 6.4). In this story of migration the Kongo people were born in Ethiopia and dispersed into Nubia, Egypt, and even Israel as well. They dispersed further south into Africa, influencing and intermarrying with groups in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. The majority of people made it to the Promised Land in West Central Africa and founded Kongo dia Ntotila. From there they spread east and northward into the Manianga area across the Congo River. In the year 690 many people returned to Kongo dia Ntotila, and 691 signaled the end of the construction of Mbanza Kongo. This date differs from the one posited by historians of the Kongo region, who have suggested the fourteenth century rather than the seventh century as the most likely date for the consolidation of the Kongo Kingdom.<sup>25</sup> With the arrival of the Portuguese in 1482, the Kongo Kingdom made contact with Europeans, and the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans led to the dispersal of Kongo people into the Americas. These people are referred to by BDK as the diaspora. In addition, with the founding of Liberia in 1847 by freeborn and newly freed enslaved Africans, some people of the African diaspora went back to Africa, and some of them were Kongo people.



## The Continuity of Kongo Nationalism

Bundu dia Kongo is not the first and will likely not be the last group organized around the goal of reuniting the Kongo people under a restored and sovereign Kongo Kingdom, or to deal with issues of the revitalization of Kongo culture. L'Association Musicale BaKongo (AMUBAKO), founded in 1940 by J. Tangala, and Renaissance BaKongo (RENAIBAKO), founded in 1944 in Kinshasa by J. Mavuela, are two examples of early associations formed during the colonial period that dealt with Kongo cultural issues (Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-politiques 1962, 10).<sup>27</sup> However, both of these organizations had basically ceased to function when the most memorable, significant, and really most revolutionary organization was founded in 1950 by M. Edward Nzeza-Landu: ABAKO (Association des BaKongo).<sup>28</sup> This organization would eventually play a crucial role in calls for a sovereign Kongo nation and independence from colonial rule for the country as a whole.

ABAKO began as a cultural organization that, based on its initial charter, sought to “unify, conserve, and perfect the Kongo language” (CRISP 1962, 10). Created in Leopoldville as a “scientific, linguistic, cultural and social organization” (CRISP 1962, 14) based on the Kikongo of “Ntotila” or “Mbanza Kongo,”<sup>29</sup> the organization sought primarily to publish a journal in Kikongo and organize cultural activities. This focus on the Kikongo language took place in a context of changing demographics, where although the Kongo ethnic group made up an estimated 60 percent of the African population of Leopoldville (La Fontaine 1970, 40–41), the preferred language of the city was quickly becoming Lingala, a trade language based on the Bobangi language of the Upper Congo River (Verhaegen 2003, 90–91). As a language developed for trade purposes between Europeans and middlemen on the Upper Congo River, Lingala also came to dominate the colonial army, administration, and many missions in Leopoldville as many of the workers in these institutions were also from this area (Verhaegen 2003, 91–92). The people from the Upper River areas are often collectively referred to as Bangala,<sup>30</sup> although Lingala is not the true indigenous language of any one group. Thus, in the growing city of Leopoldville, although the BaKongo dominated numerically, their language was in fact not the primary non-European language being spoken (Covington-Ward 2012, 74). ABAKO's focus on the preservation and proliferation of the Kikongo language was highly significant in the plural society of Leopoldville at the time, and even in the present, as demonstrated by organizations such as Bundu dia Kongo that seek to promote Kikongo.

Although the urge to preserve and advocate the use of Kikongo was an important objective of ABAKO, calls for Kongo nationalism appeared simul-

taneously. Dialectical variants of Kikongo were to be brought together in the pages of the journal of ABAKO serving as a form of “linguistic nationalism” (Verhaegen 2003, 94) that sought to include not only all the Kongo subgroups in the Belgian Congo (Bantandu, Bandibu, BaManianga, and so on) but also “a page for the BaKongo of the A.E.F.<sup>31</sup> and another, for our dear brothers of Angola” (CRISP Centre de Recherche et d’Information Socio-politiques 1962, 12). Indeed, all Kongo people who defined themselves as “brothers who came from the same founder/roots: Kongo dia Ntotila” were encouraged to join (CRISP 1962, 11). Thus, this founding charter had most of the major ideological components of later manifestations of Kongo nationalism: shared language and history of the Kongo Kingdom serving as the basis of Kongo cultural unity, revitalization of Kongo culture and language, and a reimagining of Kongo areas geographically, across existing borders, revised to include the relevant provinces in the Belgian Congo, people in the French Congo, Portuguese Cabinda, and Angola (Verhaegen 2003, 127). These are all key elements that also define the ideology of Bundu dia Kongo today.

Joseph Kasa-Vubu was elected president of ABAKO in 1954, replacing Edmond Nzeza-Landu. In August of the same year, ABAKO made its first attempt at political action, by presenting some of its leaders to the colonial administration as candidates to administer the Congolese section of the city. Although another non-Kongo person was chosen, this attempt foreshadowed the increased political engagement of ABAKO that would take place in the future (CRISP 1962, 29–30). ABAKO came to lead the call and political action advocating for the independence of the Congo, asserting great influence on the political process and resulting in Joseph Kasa-Vubu becoming president of the country alongside Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba (Covington-Ward 2012).

In all, ABAKO serves as the closest and most relevant predecessor of the mission and ideology of Bundu dia Kongo. At the moment of the critical transition to independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Kongo people rallied together and organized in pursuit of the goal of not only political power, but also Kongo sovereignty. Likewise, as the country transitioned to yet another new governmental structure in 2006 (the third republic),<sup>32</sup> political conditions were amicable to fostering the rise of Bundu dia Kongo as a movement that renews dormant sentiments for a restored Kongo Kingdom and seeks to augment the political strength of Kongo people overall.

### **Bundu dia Kongo and Pan-African Consciousness**

Bundu dia Kongo has many similarities with movements and ideas from throughout the African diaspora. Moreover, among the many ideological sentiments of Bundu dia Kongo lay explicit calls for Pan-Africanism and

efforts to establish and maintain connections with people of the African diaspora worldwide. This section shall briefly explore some of the Pan-Africanist tendencies and beliefs of BDK. With this, it becomes clear that Bundu dia Kongo, while a locally based organization grounded in Kikongo and histories and cultural ideas relevant to the Kongo people, also has and seeks to have a broader appeal and relevance extending beyond Kongo cultural borders.

Pan-Africanism can be generally defined as “a wide range of ideologies that are committed to common political or cultural projects for Africans and people of African descent” (Appiah and Gates, 1999, 1484). Appearing first in the African diaspora in the nineteenth century, Pan-Africanism involved ideas such as the unity and common destiny of people of African descent around the world, divine providence derived from the Bible, the need for the establishment of an independent nation-state, Black control over African land, and a focus on emigration of the African diaspora, often but not always, back to Africa, among other ideas.

Ne Muanda Nsemi and Bundu dia Kongo as a movement advocate many of the aforementioned theoretical components of Pan-Africanism. For example, Ne Muanda Nsemi prophesizes and encourages the return of Africans in the Kongo diaspora back to Kongo, where the Kongo diaspora as I understand it means people descended from enslaved Africans possibly taken from the Kongo area, and also Kongos in Liberia. In preparation for the moment when there will be a massive migration of the African diaspora to the Lower Congo, BDK has laid out several rules for their integration into society, including: to accept and follow the true religion of the Kongo people, which is BuKongo, including its rules of conduct and rituals of prayer; to learn and speak only the Kikongo language; to register with the minister of the interior of the Kongo government; and to share all their knowledge with their Kongo brethren and work for the well-being of the Kongo people (Ne Zole, February 8, 2006).

Ne Muanda Nsemi’s ideas of Pan-Africanism can also be seen in his objectives regarding Kongo sovereignty and how these interact with the larger continent of Africa. Seeking first to establish an independent Kongo nation, he then envisions abolishing all colonial frontiers, forming medium sized autonomous states that can then be grouped into five confederations,<sup>33</sup> which themselves would then form the United States of Africa (1995, unnumbered page). While the United States of Africa is not a new concept, dating back to Kwame Nkrumah’s ideas and the debates surrounding the original formation of the Organization of African Unity, the larger objective of uniting all of Africa plays a key role in Ne Muanda Nsemi’s writings and the goals of BDK as a whole.<sup>34</sup>

## Reformed Bodies, Re-formed Histories:

### Bimpampa in Bundu dia Kongo

As we have seen throughout the previous chapters, everyday cultural performances play an important role in creating, confirming, and challenging social orders, structures, and ideals of authority. The members of Bundu dia Kongo have made a concerted effort to publicize and popularize their points of view through printed pamphlets translated into multiple languages, vocal protests and gatherings, as well as through how they use their bodies. Citing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of bodily practices as a form of mnemonics, John and Jean Comaroff emphasize the importance of targeting bodily reform in situations of social transformation for the Tshidi in South Africa: "Scrambling this code—that is, erasing the messages carried in banal physical practice—is a prerequisite for retraining the memory, either to deschool the deviant *or to shape new subjects as the bearers of new worlds*" (1992, 70, emphasis mine). Along these same lines, Bundu dia Kongo uses Kongo *bimpampa* and modifications to other forms of embodied practice and comportment to remake its members, and other people (both Kongo and non-Kongo) who come into contact with them, as the creators of a very particular social world: a re-formed Kongo Kingdom. Simultaneously, *bimpampa* are used as a form of mnemonics to activate particular cultural memories of the glory of, and everyday practice within, that same kingdom. *Bula makonko* (cupped hand clapping), *dekama* (genuflection), *fukama* (kneeling), and *yinama* (bowing) all play significant roles in the everyday efforts to recreate the former Kongo Kingdom here on earth in the present day.

### Bula Makonko and Fukama

The primary example of the modification and amplification of certain embodied practices to further the goals of Bundu dia Kongo is *bula makonko*, a form of *bimpampa* based on a cupped clapping of the hands that makes a sound like Bo! Bo! Bo! *Bula makonko* is a gesture of respect that could often be seen in the interactions between the Kongo king (*mfumu*) and his court, and between members of the nobility and people of lower social classes. For example, a sixteenth-century report of Catholic missionaries in the Kongo Kingdom revealed that when the Kongo king eats boiled or roasted meat with his fingers from a large pot in front of him, he then "distributes it to his servants, giving to each their ration, which they receive with big claps of the two hands in a sign of thanks" (Cuvelier and Jadin 1954, 132–33). Moreover, twice a year the governors and local leaders throughout the kingdom come to the capital to pay their tribute to the king. When the king expresses

his approval to a governor, the governor claps his hands many times. “In a sign of contentment, he throws himself to the ground, covering his body in dust. His servants (*baleke*) do the same thing” (Cuvelier and Jadin 1954, 133). Similar behavior is expressed by the winner of a civil dispute who “claps his hands, covers himself in dust, and was conducted throughout the town in triumph” (Cuvelier and Jadin 1954, 135; also see the relation of Father Laurent de Lucques, Cuvelier 1953b, 82).

Further, when the king leaves his home, those around him must demonstrate their respect and ask for his blessing, as illustrated in the report of Giovanni Francesco da Roma, an Italian Capuchin missionary who was stationed in Mbanza Kongo from 1645 to 1646, and in Loanda for several months during 1647: “The courtiers and soldiers who are held in the interior court, get on their knees and, in quickly making two or three claps of the hands, each asks his blessing; the king holds the right hand, lightly moving the fingers as if he is playing the lute. The one to which the king would not stretch the hand in this way, would think himself unfortunate because this would be an evident index that he fell in disgrace. The king takes around half an hour to give everyone his blessing in this way (Bontinck 1964, 125).

This passage suggests a belief on the part of the courtiers in the blessing of the king, demonstrating the intertwining of both political and spiritual authority, and that the position of the Kongo king could be considered to embody divine kingship.<sup>35</sup> Other examples of *bimpampa* in everyday interactions outside of the court reveal that *bula makonko* also seems to have been an embodied form of greeting. Respect must be shown by anyone who encounters someone of higher rank on the road for example: “Meeting on the road any person of quality, they get on their knees, greet them with a clapping of the hands and continue on their journey. If they are equals, they simply continue on their way” (Cuvelier 1953b, 81). Capuchin missionary Luc da Caltanisetta’s observations, however, suggest *bula makonko* played a role even in greetings between equals in the town of Ngobila in 1698: “In this mbanza, we could also observe how these people greet each other: they touch each other’s right hand, by lightly hitting it, and then having withdrawn the hand, each hits his own hands three times one against the other; finally the person inferior in rank continues to clap his hands in order to ask the blessing of he that is superior, who during this time remains motionless” (Bontinck 1970, 130).

In the precolonial era, *bula makonko* then, was used in a wide variety of ways; to say thank you, to ask for forgiveness or pardon, as a gesture of respect, or additionally, as a greeting. Many Kongo people do still use this gesture in Luozi and other parts of Lower Congo, but it doesn’t seem to be the main form of greeting used in interactions. Rather, one observes men touch-

ing heads three times while shaking hands and women kissing on the cheek thrice in Kinshasa, and handshakes by both sexes (often while grasping the right wrist or elbow with the left hand) combined with *dekama* for women and *yinama* for men in Luozi. However, in *Bundu dia Kongo bula makonko* (combined with *dekama* for women and *yinama* for men) is used as their way of greeting not only other members of the movement but also almost all people with whom they come into contact. Members of BDK, through their responses and lack of responses in interactions with others, subtly influence the embodied practices of others. In fact, if when people on the road in Luozi or in the streets of Kinshasa greet each other in this particular way (cupped hand clapping rather than touching one another), it is an embodied signifier that they are most likely members of *Bundu dia Kongo*. In conversations with members, they explained to me that this way of greeting one another was the normal form of greeting in the Kongo Kingdom, and they are bringing it back into present day use. It can thus be seen as an embodied form both of history and of cultural revitalization, a way of moving that represents an ideology and appreciation for Kongo culture and history that is put into practice in everyday gesture for members of *Bundu dia Kongo*. The moments of awkwardness that arise when a person reaches out to shake hands and is met by empty air, are used as opportunities for educating nonmembers of *Bundu dia Kongo* about the meaning and history of the gesture. In fact, *BisiKongo* who are not members of the group are often scolded for not embodying this form of greeting, which *Bundu dia Kongo* members tout as the most authentic and traditional form, in comparison to the disdained “white man’s” handshake.

*Bula makonko* as the preferred method of greeting is one example of how, through embodied cultural performances, members of *Bundu dia Kongo* are establishing their own authority in their local settings. As I observed in Luozi, people in the town knew the members of *Bundu dia Kongo*, and would in fact be sure to use *bula makonko* as a greeting when interacting with them, even if only to avoid a verbal chastisement (see figure 6.5). Thus, with every cupped hand-clapping greeting of their members and especially the people around them who are not members of the group, *Bundu dia Kongo* challenges the cultural and political authority of non-Kongo people while simultaneously laying the ground for their own authority in regards to Kongo people.

*Bula makonko* is also incorporated into the ritual practices of *Bundu dia Kongo*. In this particular context, it seems to take on meanings more associated with opening and closing prayers, asking for forgiveness, and expressing gratitude rather than being simply a greeting. *Fukama* or kneeling also plays a major role in that during services that I attended in the local BDK *zikua* and even more so during the February mass meeting described earlier in the



FIGURE 6.5. Demonstration of the *bula makonko* gesture, Luozi, 2010. Photo by Yolanda Covington-Ward.

chapter, the vast majority of the worship service was done while kneeling. In this posture, pants are rolled up and skirts pushed out of the way so that the bare skin of the knees actually touches the rocky ground (see figure 6.6).

I was told that being on one's knees causes a person to suffer while in the process of repenting (Ne Zole, February 9, 2006). At the February 2006 BDK mass meeting, the leader of the service faced everyone else in the audience, also on his knees, with a microphone in hand. During the first opening songs of the service during the mass meeting, the crowd sang along as everyone simultaneously clapped. Then, the next part of the service involved a vocal call of "*Yenge*" (peace) issued by the leader to which the crowd responded bodily with three cupped claps, followed by a short prayer that began "*Nzitusu kwa batata bampungu tulendo*" (give thanks to the all-powerful fathers). This sequence was repeated several times. In this instance, *bula makonko* was used to open the prayer giving thanks to the spiritual beings of the Bukongo religion, including the divinized ancestors, supervisory genie, upper celestial hierarchy, and Nzambi.

One of the most notable and important aspects of the service of Bundu dia Kongo is a long, intense prayer punctuated by *bula makonko* that is done by the kneeling members of the *zikua*. The text of the prayer is as follows:

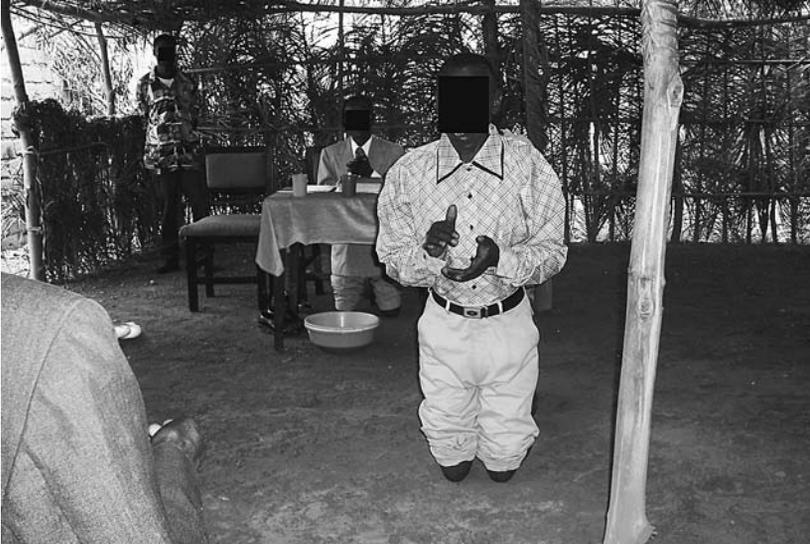


FIGURE 6.6. Bula makonko and fukama in the zikua of Bundu dia Kongo, Luozi, 2005. Photo by Yolanda Covington-Ward.

#### Prayer in Kikongo

Kembo, Kembo, Kembo,  
 mu kayengele vava ntoto,  
 yenge mayangi mingi kiese  
 mu kumbwa tata mpungu tulendo  
 tu lombele mlemvo watata mpungu tulendo

#### Prayer in English

Joy, Joy, Joy  
 in the sky, Joy here on land  
 A lot of joy, happiness  
 In the name of the all-powerful father God,  
 We ask for forgiveness from the all-powerful father.  
 (translation provided by Pierre, research assistant)

I witnessed this prayer at the February 2006 mass meeting and in every local zikua service as well. In unison, the church members begin to simultaneously pray out loud and clap quickly with their hands cupped in four-four time. According to interviewee Ne Zole, the clapping is done for purification and to ask for forgiveness from Nzambi Mpungu (God) for sins committed (February 9, 2006). I did, however, note some differences in this particular worship practice in regards to the number of times it was enacted.

At the mass meeting, the leader called out “*Iya, Sambodia, Iya*,” or “Four, Seven, Four” in Kikongo, perhaps as a reminder to the participants of the number of times they were to repeat the prayer for each section. The members present then repeated the prayer four times with clapping,<sup>36</sup> seven times without clapping, and then another four times with the clapping. However, at the services I attended in the local zikua, the prayer was repeated forty, then seventy-two, then forty times (I actually counted them). When I asked about this particular sequence and number of claps, I was told they represent the number of stages of the passage of the prayers to God: from the BisiKongo, to divinized ancestors, to Ne Muanda Kongo the archangel, and finally to Tata Nzambi Mpungu.

As the prayer is repeated over and over again with the clapping, it becomes like a chant intoned in unison by the members of Bundu dia Kongo. In the context of the worship service, the repetitive gesture of bula makonko takes center stage as an embodied cultural performance for Nzambi that is an act of simultaneous repentance and demanding forgiveness. This chanted and clapped prayer thus presents a challenge to the hegemonic Christian “prayer pose” of unmoving palms clasped together, fingers pointing upward, that one finds in all the worship services of Christians churches of Luozi, whether Protestant or Catholic, DMNA or CEC. Moreover, as this prayer and especially the clapping are seen as a means of purification and seeking absolution, bula makonko in this ritual context presents an embodied alternative to global mainstream Christian rituals such as water immersion, confession, and in the past, self-flagellation. The number of claps represents the number of stages that the prayers must pass through to reach Nzambi. Thus, this particular use of the gesture of bula makonko actually embodies the religion of BuKongo and enacts an alternate spiritual realm where divinized ancestors regain their rightful place, an archangel looks out for the Kongo people, and the messages of the BisiKongo ascend a spiritual hierarchy where Jesus Christ has no place. In this sense, bula makonko can be seen as a direct challenge to the religious hegemony of Christianity in the Lower Congo and its relevance to the experience and needs of the Kongo people.

Bula makonko is used in other ways in the spiritual worship service of Bundu dia Kongo. For instance, the three principal attributes of God are also reflected in hand clapping practices to open, close, and punctuate prayers, such as when the leader vocalizes and the congregation responds with three claps:

*Mu zola* (3 claps) (love)

*Mu ngangu* (3 claps) (intelligence)

*Mu lendo* (3 claps) (power)

Bula makonko in a sequence of three cupped claps was also used in other parts of the service, for example in response to a call intoning the names of the three founding ancestors of the Kongo people “*Nsaku, Mpanzu, Nzinga*.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, at times the congregation would respond to calls of “*kunda*” or “*tukunda*” to open or close a prayer with three cupped claps. *Kunda* in Kikongo (*kukunda* in the infinitive) has several related meanings, including to salute or honor someone by clapping and bowing slightly, to worship, to implore, to invoke, to ask for pardon (Laman [1936] 1964, 335).<sup>38</sup> In this case, prayers and embodied practices are both intertwined in the carrying of the message of the group to the spiritual world. Bula makonko then, is a multivalent embodied cultural performance that can be used to address and interact with both the spiritual realm and beings here on earth. All these examples demonstrate the importance of embodied cultural performances such as bimpampa like bula makonko for manifesting in the body the beliefs and goals of Bundu dia Kongo, both in ritual space and also in interactions in everyday life.

### Yinama

Another way of using the body that I consider is *yinama* (bowing), which again is a sign of respect often coupled with bula makonko. For example, Bundu dia Kongo members bowed in unison at the end of several prayers that began with bula makonko during the worship services. However, *yinama* plays a major role in another part of the service, one which BDK has creatively reimagined. MuKongo scholars such as Tata Fu-Kiau Bunseki and anthropologists such as Wyatt MacGaffey have studied the cosmology of the Kongo people, and one concept they have written about is a cycle of life that follows the counterclockwise path of the sun, and has four major points.<sup>39</sup> Thus, contrary to popular belief, the cross was not introduced to Africans by Christian missionaries but was known in Kongo culture before the arrival of Europeans. Life was seen as a cycle between the two worlds, with the upper half of the cross representing the world of the living, and the lower half that of the dead, with the two worlds thought to be reflections of each other across a large body of water often known as Kalunga, which divides the two worlds (W. MacGaffey 1986b; Thompson 1983; Thompson and Cornet 1981). Thompson and Cornet further explain the four points in the cycle of life between two worlds as four moments of the sun: “the Four Moments of the Sun—that is, dawn, noon, sunset, and midnight. . . . The right hand sphere or corner stands for dawn which, in turn, is the sign of a life beginning. Noon, the uppermost disk or corner, indicated the flourishing of life, the point of most ascendant power. Next . . . come change and flux, the setting of the sun, and

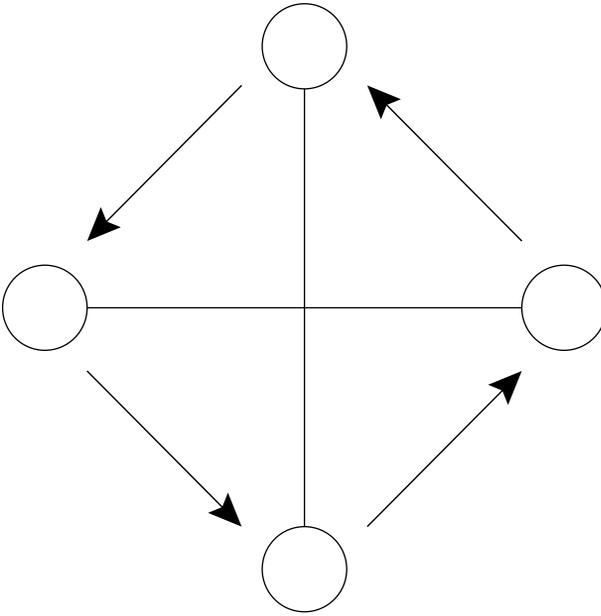


FIGURE 6.7. Adapted image of the Four Moments of the Sun (originally portrayed in A. kia Bunseki-Lumanisa Fu-Kiaua, *N’Kongo ye nza yakun’zungidila/Le Mukongo et le monde qui l’entourait*, 1969)

death, marked by the left-hand median point or disk (Thompson and Cornet 1981, 27–28). There are many symbolic drawings of this concept, including a spiral, a diamond, but namely a cross. The cross is symbolic of the meeting of the two worlds, and the crossroads (where four roads meet) thus has significance as a place of extreme spiritual power (see figure 6.7).

In the worship services of Bundu dia Kongo, there is a practice of the entire congregation turning to the four cardinal points while in the midst of song and bowing at each point in unison. The chorus of this song is, “O Kongo Dieto, Tulombele.” *Lomba* as a verb (*kulomba* in the infinitive) has a number of related meanings, including: to pray, to beg, to ask forgiveness or permission, to demand (Laman [1936] 1964, 404). Thus, in this particular context, “O Our Kongo, we ask of you/beg of you” and so on, is an impassioned, sung prayer being sent up to the sky as Bundu dia Kongo members sway gently from side to side with their arms stretched upward, rocking back and forth in time to the music. At the end of each verse and chorus, the crowd bows to that side, and turns in unison to face the next cardinal point and continue the song. When I asked what the turning to the four sides represented, I was told: “We are paying homage to four great angels of the Kongo

people: Ne Fwani kia Nzambi; Ne Makinda Ngolo; Ne Nganga Buka; Ne kia kwa Nzambi. They are at the door of the people, and we have to honor them by turning to the four cardinal points at each session” (Ne Tatu, October 23, 2005).

Ne Zole, who echoed Ne Mosi’s identification of these four great angels, referred to them as “spiritual beings who know the great secrets of the world” (February 9, 2006). The embodied cultural performance of bowing to the four moments of the sun maps the divinized ancestors of Bundu dia Kongo onto a long standing Kongo cosmological tradition while at the same time making irrelevant Christian theology and the cross as a symbol of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Thus, yinama serves as an embodied rejection of and challenge to Christianity, supplication to ancestors, and means of establishing the religious authority of Bundu dia Kongo as a spiritual organization.

### **Bimpampa as Performative Encounters in BDK**

As an organization, Bundu dia Kongo strategically uses bodily reform to transform group consciousness and existing social structures. Bula makonko as a greeting is a daily performative encounter that subtly changes social relationships by bringing together Kongo people as a group through their embodied interaction that references the former Kongo Kingdom. The BDK’s use of bula makonko as an intentional greeting in mixed ethnic settings, such as Kinshasa, also helps to draw a line of demarcation between themselves and other ethnic groups as well and provides a visual means of identifying other Kongo people in such a setting. Thus, it aids in furthering sentiments of unity as well as visually representing nationalist aspirations.

Turning to bula makonko, fukama, and yinama in the context of prayer and worship in BDK, while these gestures are most often exhibited in the zikua, at the mass meeting I attended in 2006, everything was done outdoors, in full view of curious non-BDK members. In a town and country where Christianity dominates (whether Catholic or Protestant, former mission church or African Independent Church), BDK members are directly challenging the hegemony of Christian forms of prayer and worship and the relevance of Christianity as a belief system for Kongo people. Public performances of these gestures transform social and political relationships by undermining the existing social hierarchy where Catholic priests and Protestant pastors exercise considerable power in everyday life.

In some ways, Bundu dia Kongo’s emphasis on changing how people use their bodies, to shape their consciousness, is similar to that of President Mobutu. By this I mean both Mobutu’s government and Bundu dia Kongo’s

leadership recognized how messages could be transmitted through consistent, daily orchestration of bodily practices. Within Bundu dia Kongo, a new member who uses the *bula makonko* greeting in daily life and multiple gestures in prayer and worship make the former kingdom real in the present. By embodying manners of interaction that existed in the past and worshipping Kongo ancestors, BDK members are using their bodies to create the past in the present and reposition themselves socially and politically not as members of a marginalized ethnic group and economic class, but rather as men and women worthy of respect and admiration. As BDK strategically deploys the past to shape the present, what do they do with bodies that won't behave?

### **Conflicting Performances: Machine Guns, Karate Chops, and the Subversion of Official Ideologies**

February 18, 2006. I am at the general assembly meeting of BDK in Luozi, waiting for permission to film. A group of singers and musicians enthusiastically play music, and as I wait, I survey the scene and take in the music animating the space. Although like everyone else I rock to the familiar rhythms, frankly I am disappointed, for what I am seeing doesn't seem to go along with the "traditional" ideology of Bundu dia Kongo. I am expecting a concert of traditional instruments, the likes of which I hadn't yet seen during my field research. What I see instead are an electric guitar, a synthesizer, European-made conga drums, bass drums such as found in marching bands, a lone *ngongi* painted blue, red, and yellow, and several *nsakala*. The group rented the instruments from the Protestant church right up the road! The performers, a small group of enthusiastic BDK members, are basically singing nationalist battle songs to modern rhythms. As long as the listener didn't understand Kikongo, the music could have been that of any number of popular Congolese artists, from Koffi Olomide to Le Marquis de Maison Mere.<sup>40</sup> For example, the lyrics of one song include the following lines:

#### Song in Kikongo

Wiza, Dumuka Mu Mvita,  
Muanda Nsemi Wiza, dumuka mu mvita  
Tata Kimbangu, Wiza, Dumuka mu mvita  
Etc.

#### Song in English

Come, Jump into the fight,  
Muanda Nsemi, Come, Jump into the fight  
Father Kimbangu, Come, Jump into the fight  
Etc.

The song implores the great heroes of BDK and the Kongo people in general to join the fight, and the implications of the fight are numerous: the fight for Kongo sovereignty, the fight against police and state suppression of the movement, the fight against the erasure of Kongo culture, the fight against neocolonialism—all fights Bundu dia Kongo wants to win. Later in the evening, after receiving permission to film, it becomes clear to me that words and songs were not the only things being marshaled against enemies of the movement, but actual bodies were “jumping into the fight” as well.

In the midst of filming members singing to a tune reminiscent of Congolese rumba from several decades earlier, I notice a woman crouching on the ground in front of the crowd. Some people beside her move out of her way, and so I turn my camera toward her. I see her arms outstretched as she rises slowly to a deep bend of the knees, quaking slightly. It looks as though she is possessed. I then have a flash of recognition. Earlier in the day, as I gathered my equipment to film arriving Bundu dia Kongo members, Ma Kumi, an acquaintance, had done the same gesture, making sounds like a machine gun and mimicking shooting. She said, “This is what the people in Bundu dia Kongo do. Ka Ka Ka Ka.” Astounded and incredulous, I’d left the compound not knowing what to expect.

Now, as I film, the woman (who was a bit heavysset) begins to jump up and down, and, finally, does a tuck and roll right in my direction, and then, crouching again, does another tuck and roll back toward the crowd. Several makesa guards come to loosely encircle her, and she begins making a shooting gesture again, this time with one arm. She punches outward, and then on her knees, continues to shoot, this time using her middle and index fingers on each hand, going all the way down to the ground. By this time, many more guards surround her, and one motions for her to get up. As they close the circle tighter around her, they begin to escort her away from the front of the crowd. I don’t see how it ended because one of the organizers of the event comes up to me and indicates that I should not continue filming that incident. I take the hint, and turn my camera elsewhere.

The next day, when I come back to the assembly, I see that toward the back of the crowd, a circle had formed where people manifested their possession. Many of them are doing fighting gestures. They punch straight outward with their arms as if doing karate, lift up their knees, and thrust their leg forward to end with a powerful planting of the foot on the ground. They often hold their fingers or arms so they seem to be imitating a gun, and others even make the sound of a machine gun spitting bullets. As the day goes on, here and there in the crowd, people are jumping, doing fighting gestures, and imitating shooting. Several times, another person comes to put their hand on

the possessed person's head and calm them down. The makesa readily step in when people become possessed and start to embody the possession. At one point, when many people start manifesting all at once, the makesa tell them to go to the back of the crowd and to do it back there. It seems as though the BDK leadership are trying to hide it or minimize attention to these “nontraditional” forms of embodied possession.

When I witnessed the aforementioned events, the first thing that came to my mind was that karate and machine guns had nothing to do with Kongo history and traditional culture. How do these embodied possessions fit in with the ideology of Bundu dia Kongo, if at all? Why were the leaders and organizers of the meeting reacting in the way that they did to these instances of possession?

Karate is a martial art from Japan, and machine guns could not be found in the precolonial Kongo Kingdom. Yet both of these things are familiar to Congolese, from the popularity of karate films throughout Africa (Barber 1987, 25; Frederiksen 1991, 143) to the recent history of civil war and present-day prevalence of machine gun-toting soldiers on the streets of most cities and towns in the country. Although these gestures may signal a heightened spiritual warfare, and maybe even actual actions people are willing to take to fight against state suppression, these particular embodied possessions can be seen as going against the Kongo traditionalism that BDK advocates and seeks to return to. The reactions to these types of possessions prove most fruitful for revealing the attitude of leaders of the movement. As people became possessed, security guards were sent to escort them away from the crowd, where they were almost hidden at the back, away from the gaze of the camera. Rather than embracing the spirit possession, and using it as the focus of the service, as in the DMNA church for example, the leaders, organizers, and security personnel present at the event seemed almost embarrassed by it all. It seemed clear that Bundu dia Kongo did not sanction this particular embodied practice.

The BDK members who exhibited karate moves and imitated machine guns in their states of possession are themselves engaged in performative encounters. Their embodied performances, however, can be seen as directed at multiple audiences. First, their embodiment of fighting against an unseen adversary suggests many possible targets: Christianity and Christians, critics of BDK, government leaders, corrupt officials, actual police and government soldiers, and so on. Thus it seems they are engaging in spiritual warfare on multiple levels. In their actual face-to-face encounters with police and sol-

diers, BDK members did not usually have guns. According to a special report issued by Human Rights Watch after the deadly confrontations between BDK and military forces throughout Bas-Congo in 2008, BDK members were armed with “stones, nuts, sticks, and pieces of wood fashioned into the shape of weapons” (2008, 76). A MONUC special report echoed this finding, adding that BDK members believed their innocuous objects would be supernaturally turned into powerful weapons through singing and chanting (2008, 13). In Luozi, while attending a ceremony at the grave of several BDK members who had been killed in prior conflicts with local police (prior to 2006), BDK members told me that they had used spiritual powers to protect themselves from the bullets of police, but the faith of some members had wavered and that led to people being shot. All of this shows that BDK members primarily sought to engage in battle on a spiritual plane. My point here is spiritual power plays a large role in the ability of BDK members to challenge the authority of the state, especially when they are trying to seek justice for what they see as wrongs committed against them. While I cannot say for certain whether karate or embodied machine guns were used in these confrontations with police/soldiers, I can say that for some BDK members, they play a role in the spiritual preparation for real world battles.

The other side to consider in terms of karate and embodied machine guns as performative encounters is their relationship to the leadership of BDK. As mentioned earlier, in the mass meeting I attended, people who started to show these expressions of possession were moved to the back of the crowd. Their possession had the potential for challenging the hegemonic order of the organization. The karate chops, punches, and machine gun arms were like embodied challenges to the existing authority structures within BDK because not only did they subvert the official narrative of “traditional” with their insertion of foreign modernity, but these gestures occurred while spiritual forces possessed people, which presented a challenge as well. Spirit possession presents possible access to authority sanctioned by the spiritual realm, authority that may confirm or contradict the authority of Ne Muanda Nsemi, who himself was first called through visions and dreams of spiritual beings. For example, what would happen if someone received a revelation while possessed and spoke to the crowd? Would the leaders present recognize their authority to speak? What if they claim to be the true leader of the Kongo people? What if what they say challenges the writings and speeches of Ne Muanda Nsemi? Like the Capuchin missionaries in the Kongo Kingdom in the early 1700s who sought to monopolize the authority to interpret the Bible and teach Christianity, and were thus threatened by the possession and revelations of Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita, continuous revelation and the

challenges it presents are issues that loom ever present in the movement of Bundu dia Kongo as demonstrated by the contentious embodiment of Asian martial arts and automatic assault weapons.

## Conclusion

“There was shooting, shooting, and more shooting. I was here alone with my sister and the kids, and we crouched down and waited, scared, until it stopped. It went on and on.” July 25, 2010. Ma Kudia is recounting the story of the confrontation between government forces and the local BDK group in Luozi. According to a MONUC special report, on February 28 and 29, 2008, a police force was dispatched to the town of Luozi in a larger mission to reestablish state authority in the area and suppress Bundu dia Kongo specifically (2008, 3).<sup>41</sup> In some areas such as Luozi where the police presence is minimal in daily life, Bundu dia Kongo had reportedly begun to take over state functions and administered their own justice, arresting and punishing people, and even allegedly killing several people in different towns throughout Bas-Congo.<sup>42</sup> While the police reportedly were sent to the area to arrest those responsible for the murders, the February/March 2008 campaign to restore state authority and suppress “organized resistance” (2008, 3) became a wholesale eradication of Bundu dia Kongo, as *mazikua* were destroyed wherever the police went, hospitals, pharmacies, and homes were looted, and people (usually unarmed or holding stones or sticks) were indiscriminately fired on, both BDK members and some unrelated civilians alike. In the confrontation that occurred in Luozi town between local BDK members and the police force, authorities confirm the deaths of seven BDK members while other witnesses claim many more were killed and their bodies were thrown into the Congo River. The *zikua* was burned down, along with twenty homes/buildings in the vicinity (2008, 16–17). Besides the death and destruction, sixty people were arrested in Luozi. From here, the police force moved west in search of and confronting BDK groups all along the way. Overall, the government campaign against Bundu dia Kongo lasted from February 28 until about March 16, 2008 (MONUC 2008). While the official count of casualties the Congolese government released is twenty-seven dead, including three police officers, investigations by external organizations (including the discovery of mass graves) led to estimates of one hundred (MONUC 2008) to more than 200 (Human Rights Watch 2008) dead.

When I returned to the Congo and Luozi in 2010, many things had changed. The BDK *zikua* was gone; in fact, BDK itself appeared to be gone. People seemed frightened to even talk about them, and I was told that any remaining members had gone further into Luozi territory, closer to Congo-

Brazzaville and away from the main roads and government soldiers. And who could blame them? The 2008 mass killings of BDK members were not the first; in the aftermath of Ne Muanda Nsemi's unsuccessful run for vice governor of the province in January and February of 2007, BDK members staged numerous demonstrations against electoral fraud, and 105 people were killed when police forces arrived to quell the protests (MONUC 2008, 7). Bundu dia Kongo was seen as a threat to the existing political system and leaders not just in Bas-Congo, but in Kinshasa as well, and their embodied performances that were used to represent their larger goals and ideas were a significant part of the movement itself.

The ideology and objectives of Bundu dia Kongo, from a Kongo-centered religion to the reformation of the Kongo Kingdom, all run counter to the existing structures of political and religious authority and openly challenge their basis of relevance for the Kongo people. In their pamphlets and publications, marches, speeches, songs, and embodied cultural performances, the members of Bundu dia Kongo espouse a message of redemption and autonomy for a BisiKongo population whose political power and cultural influence has diminished since the country gained independence.

Prayers and songs legitimize the religious authority of Bundu dia Kongo, but one of the most important ways that the spiritual beliefs of the group are shown is through embodied cultural performances in everyday life, such as the gestures of respect and gratitude to the ancestors who carry the messages of the Kongo people to Nzambi Mpungu. *Bula makonko* is used to open and close prayers and as the key component of a chanting prayer that embodies the number of stages in BDK's spiritual hierarchy that the prayer must travel through to reach Nzambi. *Yinama* is also used to close prayers, and also to enact the paying of respect to divinized ancestors that can be found in the BuKongo religion. *Fukama* is used in many different contexts, for repentance and to demonstrate respect or gratitude. In all, embodied cultural performances serve as an excellent medium for the transmission of the values and beliefs of Bundu dia Kongo as a movement.

Moreover, the responses from the spiritual realm in the form of visions, revelations, and even spirit possession at times serve as spiritual legitimacy of Bundu dia Kongo's practice, mission, and ideology. If messages come from the spiritual realm, are they not as valid (if not more so) as those messages received by Christians? How can their mission be challenged if it comes from God? In this way, Bundu dia Kongo offers a compelling alternative to religious traditions such as Christianity: that of a religion with its foundation in the particular history and experiences of the Kongo people. However, contact between the world of the living and the spiritual world not only confers

legitimacy on the movement but also presents a potential space to subvert the authority of BDK, an authority that is still being established. This can be seen in the efforts of the meeting organizers and security personnel at the February 2006 general assembly in Luozi to control and curb the manifestations of modern warfare (karate, machine gun gestures) in the spirit possessions of certain members of the group.

By focusing on reforming bodily practice inside and outside of ritual contexts, Bundu dia Kongo effectively re-forms the history of the Kongo people in a contemporary space. New subjects are being shaped, and the social world that they are bearing and attempting to create is that of a considerably reimaged, yet not less real, Kongo Kingdom. Embodied cultural performances such as *bula makonko*, *dekama*, *fukama*, *yinama*, and participating in *makinu* outside of the church represent a revitalization of Kongo culture, as well as a reaffirmation of the spiritual, political, and cultural ideology of BDK through the body.

By advocating a religion that places Kongo people at its center and scoffs at Christianity and “white gods,” Bundu dia Kongo presents a direct challenge to the religious authority of numerous Protestant and Catholic churches that dot the landscape throughout the Lower Congo. By actively pursuing Kongo sovereignty by supporting candidates such as Ne Muanda Nsemi for member of the National Assembly, and then vice governor of the province, and also protesting the legitimacy of non-Kongo administrators to govern Kongo people (as seen in the bloody confrontations in 2007 and 2008), Bundu dia Kongo openly defies the political authority of the state in the Lower Congo.

In all, the ideology and political mission of Bundu dia Kongo becomes more concrete and real to its members through influencing their embodied practices not only in the *zikua*, but also in everyday life. These changes in everyday cultural performances play a key role in the transformation of the mindset and vision of possibilities for both participants in the movement and other Kongo people observing their actions. The case of Bundu dia Kongo also shows embodied cultural performances can have multivalent meanings and uses that may be subversive of authority, both within and outside of the Bundu dia Kongo movement. Thus, these embodied cultural performances can even be seen as embodied revolutions, playing a key role in transforming the place and future of not just individuals, but the Kongo people overall in modern society.