

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beyond the Racial Paradigm

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transacting Power

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transgressive Hegemony

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

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

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

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

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

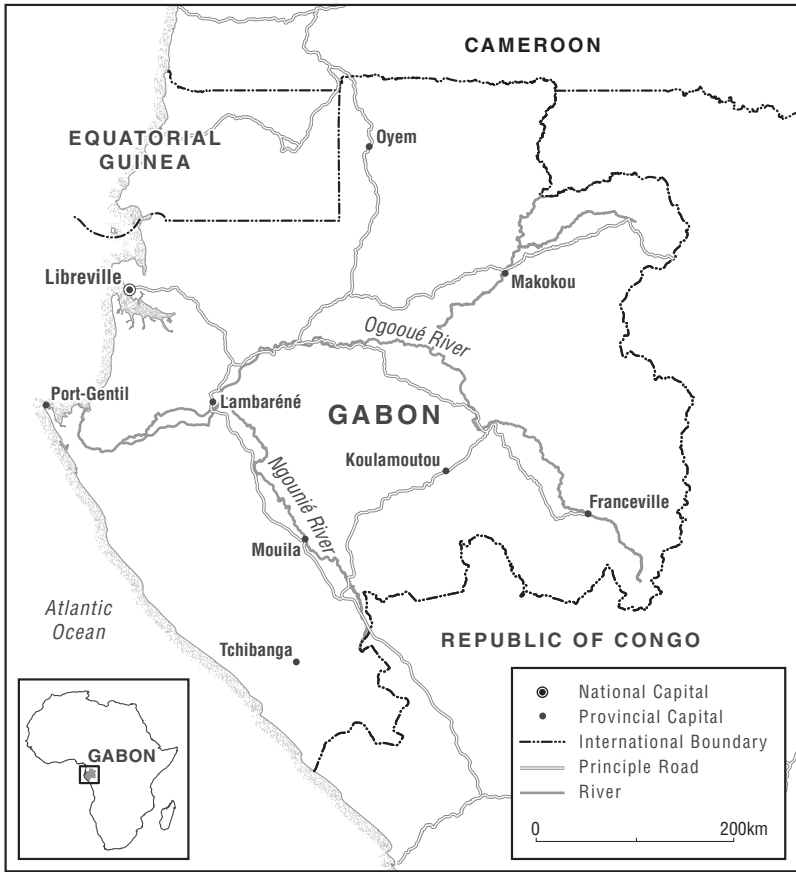
and the abnormal.⁵⁰ Although we study colonizers' and colonized's "regimes of truth," we assume that these programmatic agendas were mostly normative and constructive. As we insist on the projects, competencies, prescriptions, and desires of historical actors, we remain unaware of undercurrents of betrayal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

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

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

Terrains 1: Gabon and the Gabonese

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



I.1 Map of Gabon, 2018.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Terrains 2: French Colonialists

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

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

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

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

counted 1,223 Europeans (among approximately 450,000 black inhabitants). They numbered perhaps 3,000 in 1950.⁸² Among them, a few dozen white *forestiers*, owners of local lumber and mining companies, born in the colony and often married to Gabonese wives, constituted the most stable and rooted part of “European” families.

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

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

Writing through Gaps and Knots

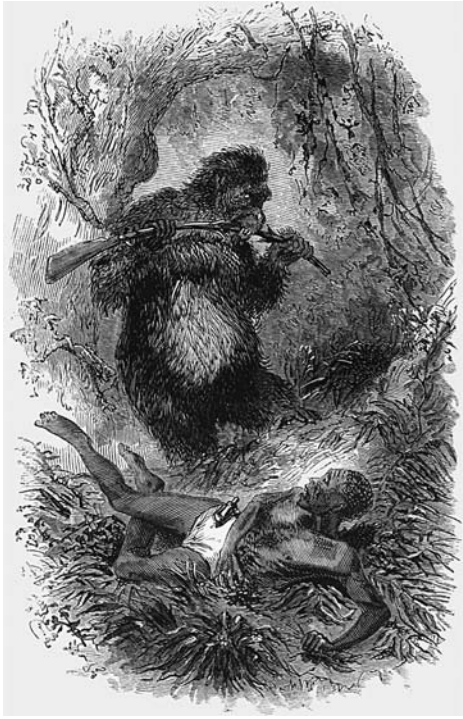
Historians of Africa, like others, need to work through gaps and holes, tenuous evidence, and the fierce elusiveness of the past. Many of the imaginaries that I track in this book were not audible in open discourses or articulate doctrines. They operated in transient experiences and non-discursive forms,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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

A Note on Sources

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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