

11. Exceptional Healing: Gender, Materiality, Embodiment, and Prophetism in the Lower Congo

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Ngunz'a Nzambi weti niakisa

Yaya wo-o-o-

Ngunza lulendo weti katula mpeve

Yaya wo-o-o-

Sola Ngunza-yakuniakisa

Yaya wo-o-o-

The Prophet of the Lord heals

Yaya wo-o-o-

The [powerful] prophet exorcizes the spirit

Yaya wo-o-o-

Choose the prophet [who] can heal you,

Yaya wo-o-o-

—Efraim Andersson, *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo*, 1858

During the early to mid-twentieth century in colonial-era Belgian Congo, a number of related religious movements disturbed the immense African colony.¹ Known interchangeably as *kingunza* (“prophetic movement” in KiKongo) or Kimbanguism, the movements began in 1921 with the activities of a Christian prophet named Simon Kimbangu.² Kimbangu was MuKongo, a member of the BisiKongo (also known as BaKongo or Kongo) ethnic group, a KiKongo-speaking group living in the modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, and Angola, located in or near the area where the precolonial Kongo

Kingdom existed. The verses in the epigraph (first displayed in KiKongo and then translated into English) come from a song created by *bangunza* (prophets) in the mid-1930s in the province now known as Kongo Central³—a majority-BisiKongo province—in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The lyrics demonstrate the importance of healing as part of prophets' repertoire of gifts and as an attraction for potential followers. In the larger contemporary religious landscape in the DRC healing continues to play an outsized role in motivating church attendance, especially considering the prohibitive cost of hospital-based medical treatment. But in the contexts of modern-day churches born from the kingunza movements, how is healing practiced, and how has it changed since the time of kingunza? Who can heal? And in what contexts?

This chapter centers on the gender politics of healing as part of the religious practices of modern-day *bangunza* in a small Protestant AIC (African independent church) located in Luozi, a town on the north bank of the Congo River in Kongo Central province. Known as the Dibundu dia Mpeve Nlongo mu Afelika (DMNA) in KiKongo, the Communauté de Saint Esprit en Afrique in French, or the Church of the Holy Spirit in Africa in English, this Kongo church was founded in 1961 during the immediate postcolonial period, breaking away from a Swedish Protestant mission.⁴ It was one of many churches that emerged from the kingunza religious movements. One of the distinguishing characteristics of this and other kingunza churches is the emphasis on the embodiment of the Holy Spirit in the bodies of members. The vigorous trembling that occurs during these experiences, which DMNA members describe as the Holy Spirit descending into their bodies, is called *kuzakama* (or *zakama*) in KiKongo. There is a belief that everyone may receive the Holy Spirit, which can be seen as almost a democratization of spiritual power. Conversely, however, only selected people may channel the Holy Spirit to heal and bless others; thus, in the DMNA church women are currently excluded from healing and holding major leadership roles. This marginalization of women, which occurred when the church was formally founded in 1961, stands in stark contrast to a long history of female prophets and healers in this region and in the kingunza movement from which the church emerged.

This chapter seeks to address this conundrum by highlighting the unique role of materiality, the Holy Spirit, and embodiment in both restricting and expanding the access of women to exercising spiritual powers. While the process of routinization—the creation of religious institutions from religious movements—usually leads to the establishment of a hierarchy and a lack of gender equity (Crumbley 2008, 23), such a process is never complete—meaning that there are ways around these restrictions. Building on the work of key re-

ligious studies scholars who study lived religion—everyday practices of religiosity—I argue that a focus on embodiment enables two types of analyses: first, examination of the eroding and porous boundaries between lived religion inside and outside of religious institutions and, second, investigation of the processual emergence of a hardening line between men and women in relationship to healing activities. My research shows that, contrary to the proscriptions of the church leadership, women in the DMNA church do heal others in some instances. Using interviews conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2005 and 2010 with DMNA church members, I analyze three such incidents to argue that lived religion is a continuously unfolding and incomplete process.

To understand how and why the roles of women transformed so drastically when the DMNA church was founded, I outline the history of the founding of the church, the importance of the Holy Spirit in the visions and dreams of the church's founder, and the subsequent adoption of material practices, and I contrast the current roles of women in the church with their past roles in the region's religious movements. I then analyze a number of justifications given for the exclusion of women from positions of spiritual authority, focusing especially on menstrual blood and sacred white cloth. Last, I address how women with spiritual gifts continue to practice healing in ways that circumvent institutional restrictions, harkening back to the colonial era, when women's healing activities were less restricted within the context of the kingunza religious movements. Overall, this chapter pushes scholars of African and African diaspora religions to explore the nuances and intricacies of the relationships between materiality and embodiment and the ways they may impact religious beliefs and practices. For the women of the DMNA church, embodied trembling and a shared belief in continuous revelation and prophetism allow them to evade restrictions put into place based on their founding prophet's inspired vision of sacred white cloth that women may potentially pollute with menstrual blood. This case shows that scholars need to pay more attention to instances in which materiality and embodiment may in fact have an ambivalent relationship with one another as lived religion unfolds in a dynamic process.

The Intricacies of Lived Religion

In her influential book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Meredith McGuire defines lived religion as “useful for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices” (2008, 12). McGuire focuses on everyday practices of religiosity, emphasizing attention to materiality, embodiment, and the

senses for capturing how religion is lived outside of institutional settings. Such an approach has been widely lauded throughout religious studies and has led to scholars studying religious practices of often marginalized or less powerful groups. However, scholars such as Nancy Ammerman warn that “lived religion does often happen on the margins between orthodox prescriptions and innovative experiences, but religion does not have to be marginal to be ‘lived.’ What happens inside religious organizations counts, too” (2014, 190). She identifies lived religion as “the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life” (190). By pointing out that lived religion occurs both inside and outside of religious institutions, Ammerman complicates notions of lived religion as occurring in any one type of space or context and blurs boundaries between sacred and profane worlds.

Extending the work of these authors even further, in this chapter I argue that a focus on embodiment, specifically healing practices, allows us to see lived religion as an unfolding and incomplete process, one in which religious practices are enacted and redefined outside of, within, and then once again outside of religious institutions. In this instance, the spiritual embodied practices that are most important in the DMNA church—what we can call Kongo lived religion—originated in persecuted colonial-era religious movements, were redefined and codified as a part of new churches immediately after independence, and are being redefined and redeployed once again by women in a number of settings outside of the walls of the church.

Moreover, this chapter also seeks to complicate the relationship between material and embodied religion. In much of the existing scholarship, material culture and embodiment are discussed as being brought together in the religious practices that make up everyday lived religion. For instance, prayer shawls and rosary beads are used as part of Jewish and Catholic prayer practices, just as devotees of Yoruba orishas in Ifá religions wear clothing in colors that are particular to each orisha (Ammerman 2013, 85; Castor 2017). Even consumption practices can form a part of everyday religion (Rouse 2006). However, materiality and embodiment may not always work toward the same ends in religious contexts. What happens when materiality and embodiment conflict?

Women Spiritual Leaders in the Lower Congo

Women have held positions of spiritual authority for centuries in the Kongo region, as prophets, healers, diviners, ritual specialists, and a number of other roles. One very important example is Dona Beatrice Vita Kimpa, a young MuKongo

woman who led the most famous precolonial religious movement in the region, the Antonian movement of the early 1700s. After becoming gravely ill and recovering, she claimed to be possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony, a male Catholic saint, a claim that had particular salience in the Kongo Kingdom as a sovereign state that had converted to Christianity in 1491. Dona Beatrice said she would reunite the fractured kingdom, which had been torn apart by power struggles after the Kongo king was killed by the Portuguese in the mid-1600s. Notably, her movement was also reformist and advocated for a Kongo-centered Christianity by saying that Jesus was born in Mbanza Kongo (the capital of the Kongo Kingdom), arguing for the existence of Black saints, and challenging the hegemony of Italian Capuchin missionaries. She gained so many followers that her influence and power threatened both European Catholic missionaries and multiple claimants to the throne. Dona Beatrice was burned alive at the stake as a heretic on July 2, 1706 (Thornton 1998b). Moreover, women *banganga* (traditional healers and ritual specialists) were quite common even before Dona Beatrice's movement and continued to exercise their professions well into the colonial period.

Moving forward to the colonial period, women were also prominent figures in the kingunza movements (Mahaniah 1975, 1988; Vellut 2005). Two of the seven disciples who were closest to Simon Kimbangu were women, Telezi Mbonga and Mikala Mandombe (Irvine 1974, 38; Pemberton 1993, 220; Rymaekers 1971, 36). Many women were also arrested and sent to penal labor camps along with men for participating in the kingunza movements. While I explore the stories of colonial-era Kongo women prophets in greater detail in my other work (see Covington-Ward 2014), suffice it to say that women had many opportunities to exercise healing abilities, to prophesy, and to engage in a wide range of activities of spiritual leadership during the kingunza movements. This, however, was to change for those women who became members of the DMNA church.

Overview of the Origins and Creation of the DMNA Church

Founded in 1961 by Masamba Esaie, a prophet who had returned from forced exile in a penal labor camp, the DMNA church is one of many that developed directly out of the kingunza movements of the colonial period.⁵ The DMNA church was trying to forge a different path from European and American mission-led churches in the Lower Congo, which included British and American Baptists, missionaries from Swedish Mission Covenant Church, Catholics

from Belgium, and others. As previously mentioned, the most notable embodied practice in the DMNA church in relation to its theology is an emphasis on healing and/or blessing through ecstatic trance, most often signified by bodily trembling as an embodiment of the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁶ This trembling, however, originates in the embodiment of *banganga*, who were active during the precolonial era and persecuted during the colonial period. Their bodies would tremble vigorously when inhabited by territorial or other nature spirits, although this type of trembling is called *mayembo* rather than *zakama* (Covington-Ward 2016, 84). Thus, nonmembers of the DMNA church referred to its members as “the people who tremble” or “the tremblers,” among other terms. People in Luozi also often referred to the DMNA church itself as the church of *bangunza*, or prophets.

Esaie and his followers determined the overall character of the DMNA church on February 12, 1961, when the church was founded at a huge gathering. This meeting was called after their form of prayer and healing (which embraced trembling caused by the Holy Spirit) had been rejected by the Swedish missioned church of which they had been members. According to Pastor Malala (the legal representative for the DMNA church and the son of Esaie), Esaie told him and it also appears in Esaie’s writings that “he [Esaie] had a vision, because he was a visionary, this man. . . . In a vision he saw the worship of angels. Angels in worship service. He saw that much of that which was in secret, in the *pendele*, was also practiced by the angels. . . .⁷ If you are going to pray, all the men, you put on your hats. All the women, you put on your headscarves. . . . Similarly, the prayer in bare feet, he saw that in his vision, the manner of dancing, and so on” (interview, Luozi, DRC, November 14, 2005).⁸

Thus, Esaie’s vision had revealed to him how he and his followers should worship, dress, and pray. The implication seemed to be that by emulating the worship of angels, he and his adepts would become closer to the angels and, by extension, to God. Revelations through visions and dreams such as these play a large role in the kingunza tradition. Kimbangu himself was called to become a prophet through voices he heard, as well as a number of dreams and visions (Mackay 1987, 124; Mackay and Ntoni-Nzinga 1993, 241; Pemberton 1993, 204). Because he believed in the divine source of these visions, Esaie was inspired to re-create the worship of the angels through dress and worship practices in the new DMNA church that he established.

The prophet Esaie’s vision of angels revealed not only certain forms of worship but also a particular type of dress (Pastor Malala, Luozi, November 14, 2005). Thus, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the DMNA

church members is that they dress in all-white clothing. Although this attire is not obligatory and people can still enter the church without it, it is the preferred form of dress for the church. In relating the white cloth to the Esaie's vision, the white dress represents and embodies a spiritual connectedness to God. In the church, the color white is also connected to honor and worthiness, with pastors and deacons pointing me to the biblical passage of Revelations 3:4: "Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy" (New International Version). Moreover, church documents further state that "to be clothed in white signifies being prosperous . . . honored, happy."⁹ Pastor Kasambi, the primary pastor of the Luozi DMNA church at the time of the interview, added that the color white also signifies purity and cannot be worn if you have sinned (Luozi, November 12, 2005).¹⁰ This is another reason that wearing the color white is important in the church.¹¹ Thus, in the DMNA church, the wearing of white cloth has become a visual sign of one's congregational membership and, moreover, one's spirituality and moral standing.

While the color white has particular meaning in biblical verses and Christian theology, the color white and white clothing have salience in other ways for many congregants in the DMNA church. White (*luvemba*, plural *mpemba*) is also an important color in Kongo cosmology, where it is associated with the spirit world and the land of the dead. This is opposed to the color black (*kala*), which is associated with the land of the living, with both worlds separated by red (*tukula*), the color of transition between the two worlds (Fu-Kiau 1969; MacGaffey 1986b, 45).¹²

Overall, the DMNA church came to define itself through a combination of distinctive material culture and embodied practices. The white cloth—supported through biblical scripture, inspired visions, and traditional Kongo beliefs about the land of the dead—marked the bodies of DMNA adherents in a larger religious landscape while also serving as a material means of accessing the spiritual realm and the Holy Spirit. Kuzakama/zakama, the embodied trembling caused by the Holy Spirit, signaled a direct connection to God without the need for missionaries as intermediaries and redefined the worship practices of the DMNA as a distinctly Kongo form of Protestant Christianity. Through a shifting contrapuntal dialogue, both materiality around white cloth and spirit-induced trembling come to play a huge role in the larger discourse around women, their bodies, and their roles in the DMNA church and in healing practices more generally.

Women in the DMNA Church and Their Rejection as Spiritual Leaders

When the church was officially established on February 12, 1961, decisions were made not only about the form of dress and worship but also about the role and status of women in the church. The routinization of religious movements into established churches has had similar outcomes throughout Africa and across the world. Religious movements that were originally egalitarian, especially in regard to gender, are often codified into hierarchical religious institutions in which women are marginalized. As Deidre Crumbley observes in her study of Yoruba AICs, “During this routinization process . . . the radicalism of the original vision is often dramatically domesticated. . . . Gender equity yields to the emergence or reemergence of male domination” (2008, 23). This also applies in the DMNA church. Women cannot act in the role of pastor, deacon, healer, or *ntwadisi*, nor can they preach the word of God to a mixed-sex congregation.¹³ Preaching is allowed only if those present are all women. Women can, however, pray for the sick as well as participate in the service as church members. There is also a women’s organization within the church headed by the pastor’s wife, who also heads a similar, yet larger organization (Protestant Women) for all the women of the local Protestant churches in Luozi. In our conversation about the roles of women in the church, Pastor Kasambi admitted that some women do have the gift of healing and that the fact that it cannot be practiced in the church can be seen as a form of discrimination (Luozi, November 12, 2005). However, Pastor Malala would probably disagree, as he said that although women’s roles are limited, women are very important in the church and “are not marginalized” (Luozi, November 14, 2005).

Women play a vital role in the DMNA church as members of the congregation (see figure 11.1 for a photo of the women and girls of the DMNA church). Often females made up the majority of the congregants that I observed in the church over the course of my research. The gender makeup of the congregation was made even more evident through the spatial separation of the sexes, since the men’s side of the sanctuary often looked empty, while the women’s side was often filled to overflowing. Moreover, women are also essential to the singing that takes place in the church owing to a gendered call-and-response pattern in which the men sing a verse and the women answer in response.

Regardless of their numerical majority, women’s roles are circumscribed in the DMNA church in Luozi. At this point I would like to consider two questions: First, what roles and positions of spiritual authority did women have in the kingunza movement and Kongo religious history before the founding of



FIGURE 11.1. Women, girls, and several small boys next to the DMNA church in Luozzi, Democratic Republic of Congo, July 18, 2010. Photograph by author.

the church? Second, on what grounds were women excluded from positions of spiritual authority and from enacting certain rituals in the DMNA church?

That the process of routinization leads to the exclusion of women from positions of spiritual and political authority within the church is not unique to the DMNA church. Rosalind Hackett's (1987) study of female religious leaders in AICs in Calabar, Nigeria, reveals a recurring pattern in which the leadership of female-founded churches is either willingly handed over to or usurped by men, with some exceptions. Brigid Sackey's (2006) study of the status of women in AICs in Ghana reveals that gender relations and the status of women depend on the social and historical context in which the churches emerge, so that in some cases female leaders are replaced by men. Bennetta Jules-Rosette's (1975, 1981, 1996) studies of the roles of women in Maranke and Marowe churches in Zambia, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo show that women in these churches have access to ceremonial leadership through their roles as singers, subgroup leaders, and midwives but "are formally excluded from the

groups' major decision-making processes" (1981, 193). Moreover, Crumbley's (2008, 96) extensive study of three Yoruba Aladura churches reveals the diversity of women's roles in churches within the same system of spiritual beliefs: in the Christ Apostolic Church, female ordination is prohibited, but women can be evangelists and head ministers; in the Celestial Church of Christ, women can neither be ordained nor preach and are excluded from almost all ceremonial leadership; and in the Church of the Lord-Aladura, women can be ordained alongside men.

But how is the exclusion of women (who often make up the majority of the congregation in AICs) from positions of spiritual and political authority justified in different AICs? Based on her research in Ghana, Sackey (2006, 65–68) reveals a number of reasons for the usurping of women's authority in newly established AICs. These include the desire to uphold the status quo set by European missionaries, the higher literacy rates of men (making them better equipped to deal with administrative matters), restrictions on women based in biblical scripture, negative stereotypes about women's "disorders" (lack of mental capabilities, menstrual uncleanliness, etc.), and attempts by men to secure whatever powerful positions were not taken by Europeans in African colonial societies.

In my own interviews about the DMNA church, two main narratives were highlighted when discussing the reasons for not allowing women to hold leadership positions or to heal, both of which fit within Sackey's discussion of negative women's disorders: sexual impropriety and menstrual blood. Both of these justifications invoke the body in different ways: as a tool of seduction and forbidden pleasure and as the source of a tangible, biological fluid that not only threatens to contaminate but may also cause spiritual harm.

In regard to sexual impropriety, Pastor Kasambi stated that in the past, when deacons, deaconesses, and other leaders left their respective homes to evangelize together, there were cases of adultery. For this reason, women as a group were prohibited from becoming pastors and deacons (Luozi, November 12, 2005). One notes, however, that the punishment of an entire sex was one-sided; men were not excluded from these positions although they were also involved in cases of infidelity. Paul Nyuvudi, a Kongo evangelist who himself became active in the bangunza movement, also mentions in his 1928 account prophets and prophetesses living in the same house and having relationships that led to pregnancy (Mackay and Ntoni-Nzinga 1993, 251–253). What emerges in both the interview and Nyuvudi's text are concerns about sexual impropriety when women and men in positions of spiritual power work together. However, the burden for such illicit sexual relations is placed on the women, so the encum-

brance of moral weakness is borne by them alone. Like other essentialist biblical discourses that present women as temptresses who ultimately lead men astray (Bach 1997; Higginbotham 1993), in the case of the bangunza movement the women once again shoulder the brunt of responsibility for mutual adultery, and such reasoning is used to curtail opportunities for spiritual advancement that other women after them may seek.

Another type of women's disorder that seems to attract significant attention in discussions of the exclusion of women from spiritual leadership is menstruation and menstrual blood. Crumbley (2008) has thoroughly explored the discourse and practice surrounding menstrual blood and women's status in three Yoruba Aladura churches. Thus, for example, while women can be ordained in the Church of the Lord-Aladura, both ordained and unordained women are excluded from the sanctuary when menstruating (77). It is such an important rule that it has been written into the church's constitution. Moreover, in the Celestial Church of Christ, women cannot preach, must avoid the altar at all times, and cannot enter the church while menstruating. It is believed that the angels are offended by the smell of menstrual blood (81).

Materiality emerges as a key factor when, in considering the justifications for the blanket exclusion of women from positions of spiritual and political authority in the DMNA church, the most compelling reason likewise centers on the flow of menstrual blood and its potential contact with the dress of angels—the white cloth. Before the meeting that led to the formation of the DMNA church, women were important members of the kingunza movement who also laid their hands on people to heal and bless them. According to Pastor Malala, however, this was prohibited after February 12, owing specifically to concerns about menstrual blood:

YOLANDA: Can women become pastors in the church?

MALALA: In our church, at first, women did this. They even laid on hands. . . . All of these things, they were prohibited. What happened? There is a principle, or rather I don't know whether it is a taboo or what, a woman, in the state of menstruation . . . is seen as a certain impurity, [she] can't come into the church. No . . . when she finishes her cycle, she washes herself, after three days, she goes to return to the church. But before this was done . . . we observed women who didn't know how to keep their body hygienic. In America it is different . . . but here it is deplorable, the hygienic consciousness, and is regrettable. Women don't even know to cover themselves with underwear and to put everything there that is necessary to avoid the blood

escaping. So she comes to the service, as she has the habit of putting on her white dress, then with the economic forces, she doesn't even have underwear, nothing, and you see, there are some women who stain. We saw a certain woman who was laying on hands, and it began to run down her leg. Thus, when this happened, this thing, we said, no. . . . It is in this way, we said to prohibit this, on February 12. (Luozi, November 14, 2005)

Several themes emerge from this explanation of the exclusion of women from spiritual power in the church. The first is the idea of a woman's menstrual blood as impure and unclean. A menstruating woman's presence is prohibited in the space of the church itself, and she is allowed to return only after a prescribed period of time has passed after the end of her cycle. As the menstrual blood is seen as impure, the moral and spiritual purity symbolized by wearing the white cloth of the angels is thus sullied by the menstrual blood that escapes the woman's body and comes into contact with the white cloth. This need to control menstrual blood lest it contaminate or pollute echoes similar gendered conceptions about women and their bodies present in the seminal work of Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) and, more recently, in research among widows in southern Africa (see Golomski, this volume).

Conceptions of menstrual blood as impure predate the formation of the DMNA church. In his early twentieth-century ethnographic study of Kongo customs, John Weeks notes, "During menstruation a woman must not cook her husband's food nor any other man's, neither touch anything belonging to men, and must not return the salutation of any man. . . . [S]he is unclean during these days" (1908, 418). Swedish missionary Karl Laman's own ethnographic study, based on notes written by Kongo informants between 1910 and 1918 (Janzen 1972, 320), mentions similar ideas about menstrual blood: "A woman staying in a house for menstruating must not plant manioc, for it will be no good. Nor may she pass the tobacco plantation of another, or this too, will be adversely affected—the tobacco will have a pungent taste. She may not, either, enter a house in which there is a *nkisi*, for a menstruating woman is unclean" (Laman 1962, 3:207).¹⁴ After the DMNA church was founded, a house for menstruating women was among the structures erected at Nzietta, the headquarters of the DMNA church. The women must reside there until their menses ends and they are purified from their condition (Fu-Kiau 1969, 152). A. kia Bunseki-Lumanisa Fu-Kiau, a preeminent MuKongo scholar, refers to this women's menstruation house as a representation of "impurity in the Church of the Holy Spirit" (Fu-Kiau 1969, 152).

A second theme that emerges in Pastor Malala's discussion of the decision taken on February 12, 1961, is a concern about women's lack of hygienic consciousness in their white dresses. This he attributes to both larger social financial problems and a general lack of knowledge about hygiene and maintenance. However, how widespread were such incidents? Is the pastor underestimating women's ability to cope with their monthly menstruation? I question the assumption that women lacked the knowledge to take care of their bodies, since they had to deal with menstruation each month and had the knowledge of mothers, grandmothers, and other women in the community at their disposal. I also wonder if my presence as an American researcher encouraged Pastor Malala to articulate the exclusion of women within a larger discourse of underdevelopment and hygiene. This view is not so different from the ideologies of the Belgians and other European colonizers in their judgments of African cultural practices as inferior. Here, however, the alleged lack of hygienic containment of menstrual blood is problematic because of the contact between that which is impure and the sacred white cloth.

A third theme that is latent here but more pronounced in other discussions and interviews is the belief in a type of force in menstrual blood. According to Fu-Kiau (1969, 119), blood, or *menga*, is one of many powerful bodily fluids (along with saliva, urine, and tears) and has a type of neutral force that can be used for either good or bad, depending on the intention. To understand the significance of this life force, we must place it within larger Kongo conceptions of body and soul. Although there are variations throughout the Kongo cultural region, some understandings of body and soul are shared in many groups, while the names may be different. Traditionally, there was a belief in a "double person" concept, in which there is an inner person and an outer person, with each of these people consisting of two parts (Jacobson-Widding 1979, 309–324). The outer person, often called *nitu*, consists of an outer body or shell, *vuvudi* (which physically rots upon death), and the inner invisible and perishable aspect of the soul, called *moyo*. "Among the Kongo proper . . . the destructible aspect of the soul is called *moyo* or *mvumbi*. This is the life-essence or the life-force, which resides in the blood (*menga*). . . . *Moyo* is destroyed by death, but not immediately. It does not cease to exist until all the liquids of the body have dried up" (307).¹⁵ Thus, Kongo conceptions of body and soul reveal that blood is thought to have some sort of power based on the life essence that inhabits it. In fact, this life essence, *moyo*, is believed to be eaten by witches as part of witchcraft (308). Blood (usually from animals) is also used in sacrifices and in composing an *nkisi* (sacred medicine) "in order to imbue it with power" (Laman 1962, 40).

There is also evidence that women's menstrual blood is perceived to be powerful not only in a general sense but more specifically as an active force. In his interview Pastor Kasambi also supported the exclusion of women from the church when menstruating through the belief that their condition and their presence in the church take away the ability to enter into trance (Luozi, November 12, 2005).¹⁶ Mama Ntima, the wife of Pastor Kasambi and a DMNA church member, confirmed a belief in the active force of menstrual blood, saying, "When I was young, my mother said, 'If you get your menstruation, you have to tell me because since ancient times, according to our ancestors, this blood is an impure blood, very bad. Because if you are menstruating, if you cook for your father, which he eats and then goes to [the] fields, he is at risk for an accident'" (Luozi, July 27, 2010). Thus, women's blood is believed to have the power to both sap the ability to receive the Holy Spirit and cause harm or "bad luck." Menstrual blood, then, is not just material but active in its own right. Thus, for the founders of the DMNA church, the "potential impurity" of women's menstrual blood invalidates their full participation as spiritual leaders in the DMNA church.

Kongo Women in the DMNA Church and the Prophetic Tradition

For Kongo people living in the Lower Congo, the constant presence of propheticism as articulated through *zakama*, trembling caused by the Holy Spirit, shapes people's sense of themselves and self-definition as Christians in very particular ways. Here *zakama* is not just an individual experience; it is also couched within a historical lineage of shared embodiment. In his analysis of trends in Kongo religious thought before, during, and after European colonialism, John Janzen (1977) associates trembling with the concept of *mpeve* and its relevance for spiritual belief and action: "*Mpeve* specified the vital principle or attribute of every individual. Its verbal root, *veeva*, meant to blow, to breathe, or implied the breeze responsible for the fluttering of a cloth or flag" (107). The manifestation of *mpeve* in the expression of the Holy Spirit through embodied trembling thus aligns with this preexisting belief system and, notably, is available to all, regardless of sex. Women, then, can also tap into this prophetic tradition and thus navigate some of the restrictions that emerged in the postcolonial period.

A number of questions can be asked about the disconnect between the official doctrine of the DMNA church and the moments of slippage where there lie possibilities for women's spiritual leadership. While the DMNA church sought to redefine the role of women in its organization on February 12, 1961, based

on a discourse of sexual impropriety and menstrual blood that polluted sacred cloth, what happened to women who healed with the Holy Spirit? Did the practice just disappear altogether? Moreover, what happened with postmenopausal women? Or pregnant women who were not menstruating? In the interviews that I conducted in the town of Luozi during the summer of 2010, I began to observe an interesting trend in the responses of my interviewees. Women are banned from healing; however, in actual practice, women continue to heal, mostly in private but also in public in some exceptional instances. Through their own trembling bodies, animated by the Holy Spirit, women are able to circumvent the restrictions that emerged from the prophet Esai's revelations.

The first example occurred when Pastor Kasambi was still enrolled in school to complete his training to become a pastor. He became sick and had a serious pain in his ribs, which increased whenever he took a deep breath. He went to be healed in the DMNA church, but according to Mama Ntima, "the miracles were powerless." After not receiving relief in the church or from the doctor at the local hospital, they were visited by two older women, Mama Sedima and Mama Leni. The women said that God had told them to come and heal him and that his illness was caused by a jealous classmate who would come to check on him. They prayed over Pastor Kasambi, and Mama Sedima trembled, full of the Holy Spirit, while Mama Leni sang. Mama Sedima also used water, her Bible, and a short stick called an *nkawa*, which she shook over Pastor Kasambi's body while saying "in the name of Jesus" three times. Soon thereafter, his classmate did in fact visit their home to inquire about Pastor Kasambi's health. He asked, "How were you healed?" and the two women responded, "It is the Holy Spirit that healed him" (Mama Ntima, Luozi, July 27, 2010).

This was a private healing, away from the church and away from the prying eyes of others. However, these women used the same tools and the same embodied characteristics that male prophets use in the church. Moreover, they healed a man training to become a pastor in the same church where they themselves were excluded from practicing their gift of healing. This healing, as an expression of lived religion, embodied several characteristics already recognized and incorporated into the religious practices and beliefs of the DMNA church. The belief in spiritual causes of illness that can be traced to particular people, the presence of the Holy Spirit as evidenced through embodied trembling, the use of singing to help invoke the Holy Spirit, and the use of blessed water and the *nkawa*—all of these elements are part of the religious practices and beliefs of the DMNA church. What is different here is that the prophecy about the jealous classmate was not checked and approved by any male church leader and that these were extraordinary circumstances in which all other options had

been exhausted. Mama Sedima and Mama Leni were able to accomplish what male DMNA church leaders had not: healing Pastor Kasambi of his ailments and fending off the spiritual attack of his jealous classmate. This case study allows us to see how the activities that define the lived religion of DMNA church members exist both within and outside of the church walls and are redefined as appropriate for women when the circumstances have become drastic.

The second example is another private healing away from the church but in a more public space. Mama Ntima recalled the following story. She and her teenage son were working on one of their family fields in 2006, quite a few miles away from Luozi. It was common practice for local inhabitants to live in the town of Luozi and farm on plots of land that were several hours away on foot. Mama Ntima and her son had walked to their family's plot, which was located in a very isolated rural area. They were the only people there, and there was no one else around to assist them. Suddenly, her son fell to the ground, complaining of a headache, clutching his legs, and crying. He said he could not walk. She ran to him and said she heard a voice telling her to "niakisa yandi," which means to remove the bad spirits from him. She prayed and prayed to remove the bad spirits and began to tremble with the Holy Spirit (*zakama*). After some time, he stood up and walked, and they went home.

As in the previous example, Mama Ntima found herself in an extreme situation. While under normal circumstances she would not be allowed to try to heal anyone under the rules of the DMNA church, in this situation no one else was present to assist in fending off the perceived spiritual attack that had temporarily disabled her son. Using prayer and embodied trembling, she was able to help her son to recover. It is noteworthy that she mentioned hearing a voice. Hearing voices is part of the experience of continuous revelation that defines the Kongo prophetic tradition in this area. Indeed, Kimbangu himself heard voices that pushed him toward becoming a prophet: "But from day to day I heard a voice that told me I would do the work of Peter and of John. I would be an apostle" (quoted in Pemberton 1993, 204). By heeding the spiritual voice and enacting the prayer and *zakama* that worked to chase away bad spirits, Mama Ntima placed herself firmly within the Kongo prophetic tradition, joining many other men and women who have acted as prophets in the region. This larger prophetic tradition, based on a number of embodied practices and beliefs, has shaped not only lived religion in the DMNA church itself but also lived religion outside of its walls.

The third and final example is the story of a woman named Mama Lutatamana, as told by Mama Luzola, another DMNA church member. This story came up after I had finished an earlier interview with Mama Luzola and had turned

off the recorder. My research assistant, Marie, reached out to Mama Luzola to ask if we could interview her about this particular incident, verify the details, and record it, and she agreed. According to Mama Luzola, there was a large DMNA revival meeting in the town of Luvuvamu in 1998 or 1999.¹⁷ This meeting was attended by people from many DMNA churches throughout the Lower Congo, as well as some members from across the border in the Republic of the Congo, specifically from Point-Noire. I have reproduced the interview at length to try to fully capture how embodiment and healing drove a public confrontation about women and healing:

MAMA LUZOLA: I can speak very well about that, and I also was there that day, I was at Luvuvamu. There were people from Pointe-Noire who came to Luvuvamu, and then there was a woman named Mama Lutatamana, and precisely then a woman from the mission who really got sick in her house, suddenly just like that. She was even going to die. Her children were crying. The husband wasn't there, he had left to welcome the people from Point Noire who were coming, and others had left to look for an animal; there were only women. Mama Lutatamana did her work, and the sick woman woke up immediately, and then when they arrived, the people from Pointe Noire weren't happy to see that a woman could heal another woman. She had encircled the woman who was nearly half-dead.

YOLANDA: How?

MAMA LUZOLA: She gave the *lusakumunu* [benediction/blessing], she had circled around the sick woman three times with a handkerchief, she also gave water to the sick woman. She shouted aloud, PLEASE!

YOLANDA: With kuzakama?

MAMA LUZOLA: With kuzakama also, full of the Holy Spirit. Then the woman woke up also. She found her healing.

YOLANDA: She had also . . .

MAMA LUZOLA: Yes, she had also laid hands on her . . .

YOLANDA: What happened with Mama Lutatamana afterward?

MARIE: The people were angry.

MAMA LUZOLA: Why? The church itself said, Why did a woman heal, because it is not authorized? Now, the leader who is there, the revival camp leader, said it is the Holy Spirit who authorized it. Since the woman was guided by the Holy Spirit, leave it alone then! It is God that wanted her to do this . . .

YOLANDA: What is the name in KiKongo?

MARIE: *Kupupula* [creating a violent current of air in order to make something fall—she imitates the gesture of vigorously flapping a cloth as she explains]. If it is for a sick person, it is *vayikisa mpeve zambi* [make the bad spirits come out]. You say, *Vayika!* Get out! *Kupupula*, it is to do the action to make the bad spirits leave, which the *bangunza* do with their handkerchiefs/cloths. *Vayika* is a verbal action, and *kupupula* or *kububula* that accompanies it is a physical action. (Luozi, July 30, 2010)

This example presents a compelling set of practices and beliefs that highlight multiple dimensions of embodiment within the context of spiritual healing in the DMNA church—spiritual forces making bodies tremble, flapping cloths affecting spiritual forces within bodies, an unsanctioned woman running around and touching sick bodies to foster healing and protection. To start, I want to address the *lusakumunu*. This is a special ritual blessing in the DMNA church (created by a woman in fact; see Covington-Ward 2014) in which male leaders of the church run counterclockwise around lines of kneeling church members three times to bless them and protect them against spiritual harm. Women do not normally give the *lusakumunu*, only men. However, in this instance Mama Lutatamana enacted this blessing to ritually protect the sick woman. Before we assume that this act is just an appropriation of church ritual, we should acknowledge the possibility of nonchurch influences on the origins of the *lusakumunu* itself, as making three circles also existed historically in other spiritual traditions in the area, such as *Lemba*, a therapeutic healing and trade association that emerged in the region in the seventeenth century (Janzen 1982, 193). With this, the *lusakumunu* that was created in the DMNA church may have also been drawing on non-Christian lived-religion traditions in the area. The same can be said of the embodied trembling caused by the Holy Spirit, which harkens back to the *kingunza* (prophetic) movements but also references *banganga* (traditional healers and ritual specialists) simultaneously. Mama Lutatamana also used her handkerchief to try to force bad spirits out of the woman's body. As I have witnessed it, this is done as a flapping motion that is made near the body using the handkerchief, creating a sudden current of air (*kupupula*). Moreover, Mama Lutatamana laid her hands on the woman, openly healing her in a public space with many other women watching.

In response to this healing, many male DMNA church members were angry, while the revival leader eventually supported the healing event. The situation of this healing echoed previous circumstances: men were not around or available, a person was gravely ill, and the situation called for prompt action. What

differed was the incredibly public nature of this healing; many women were watching, rather than a dyad or small group. The stakes were definitely higher in this case because during the colonial era, it was often public healing that attracted followers to Kimbangu and other prophets. I read this situation as certain members of the DMNA church seeing Mama Lutatamana as a threat to the hegemony and authority of their church. In seeking to proscribe her activities, the DMNA church reclaimed the embodied practices that composed the lived religion of their members as a form of DMNA worship specifically. However, the male revival leader recognized Mama Lutatamana's claim on the larger Kongo prophetic tradition that shaped her healing practices; "the Holy Spirit . . . authorized it." All of this shows the ongoing dialogue between lived religion within and outside of the church walls and a circulating body of knowledge, beliefs, and embodied practices that have been shaping this region for centuries.

Together these three examples emphasize the importance of the body as a conduit (Covington-Ward 2016) between the natural and supernatural realms, where spiritual forces are acting on the women in the DMNA church, leading to a circumvention of the restrictions on women's roles. The women are not claiming to be acting intentionally but rather responding to the embodied callings of the Holy Spirit. People in this region have historically believed in continuous revelation—that God continues to interact with humans into the present day (Thornton 1998a, 257). The presence of God, through being filled with the Holy Spirit, hearing voices, having visions and revelations, and experiencing embodied trembling, continues to happen for Kongo people regardless of gender. Thus, while Esaie's vision shaped the importance of white cloth, material practices, and the restriction of women's roles in the DMNA church, it was not the last word (or gesture) on the matter. The lived religion of women in this church (and the men and women they heal) contests these restrictions in many ways.

Conclusion

In closing, this chapter has argued for renewed attention to the contrapuntal dialogue between materiality and embodiment in African and African diasporic religions. Rather than assuming that material objects, material practices, and embodiment are always working together to further spiritual aims, I have extensively examined a discourse based on materiality that both enables and restricts women's participation in the DMNA church and that is challenged (and is always open to be potentially challenged) by Holy Spirit-induced embodied trembling. Women healing in different contexts outside of the DMNA church

(both privately and publicly) reveal the tenuous claims on spiritual authority that derive from the materiality of the sacred white cloth. With or without the constrictions tied to menstrual blood and potential contamination, Kongo women in the DMNA church always possess the potential to wield prophetic gifts, like their male counterparts and their ancestors before them. Indeed, this prophetic heritage is open to all in the region, regardless of religious affiliation or gender. Mama Ntima clearly confirmed this when she said, “Whether you are a member of the church or not, you can do this miracle” (Luozi, July 27, 2010). This realm of spiritual possibility, grounded in the body, enables the exceptional healing of DMNA women.

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NOTES

1. In the epigraph I have more accurately translated two words from the original translation provided by Efraim Andersson.
2. *Ngunza* in KiKongo is defined as “someone who speaks in the name of a chief; hero, prophet” (Laman 1936, 696). In the context of the religious movements and churches that this essay is based on, *ngunza* is generally understood to mean “prophet” (the plural is *bangunza*).
3. Kongo Central is the current name for the province that was known as the Lower Congo (Bas-Congo) during much of the colonial and postcolonial period. The name of the province was changed to Kongo Central in 2015.
4. Before independence, the church it had belonged to was led by missionaries of the Svenska Missionförbundet (Swedish Mission Covenant Church).
5. Hundreds of Kongo men and women were arrested for engaging in prophetic activities and sent to penal labor camps in other parts of the vast colony. Kimbangu was imprisoned in one such camp for thirty years and died there in 1951. This long-term confinement was the most common approach used by the Belgians to try to suppress the movements.

6. Trembling as a sign of contact with the spiritual realm played a crucial role in healing, divination, and initiation in the traditional religions of precolonial Congo as well. The spirits involved were usually nature spirits, ancestors, or others who were no longer in the world of the living; there was also widespread belief in a larger, more powerful god known as Nzambi Mpungu (see Bockie 1993; Brown 2012).

7. According to Pastor Malala, *pendele* was the name for the secret meeting places where kingunza prayer and healing sessions were held, often in the forest, during the persecution of the prophetic movements during the colonial period.

8. All of the names of interviewees in this chapter are pseudonyms. I have followed the practice of using Tata (Father), Mama, Pastor, or other titles when referring to my interviewees because these titles of respect were used to address older men and women in Luozi when I did my research.

9. I was given a copy of “Les Grandes lignes doctrinales” (2005) while I was in Luozi. This is an internal church document laying out the larger beliefs and practices of the DMNA church.

10. In my discussions of whiteness as representing purity, I do not want to ignore the racial hierarchies that emerged out of slavery and colonialism, which equated moral superiority, cleanliness, and all that is good with people of European descent and moral inferiority, slovenliness, and all that is bad with people of African descent (see Kim Hall [1995] for some of these juxtapositions in English literature and travel narratives and Yolanda Covington-Ward [2016] for a brief discussion of racial ideas of whiteness in the larger Congo). However, further research needs to be done on the particular expression of such beliefs in the DMNA church in particular.

11. Many of the same associations can be found in Elisha Renne’s study of the meaning of white cloth in traditional Yoruba religious worship and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria, in which she explores “the process of progressive distinction by which religious groups express new beliefs through material objects” (2005, 141). Like in the DMNA Church, white cloth came to play an important part in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, based on visions of angels dressed in white seen by founders of the church (2005, 146) and the association of white garments with morality and spiritual purity.

12. Moreover, in traditional Yoruba religious beliefs, white cloth was and is used for “protection, as medicine, and as a representation of spiritual connections” (Renne 2005, 143).

13. The *ntwadisi* is the person who weighs the spirit of congregation members during a ritual known as the *bascule*. The *bascule* is a part of the weekly worship practice and involves each church member approaching the *ntwadisi*, who is filled with the Holy Spirit, and trying to grasp his hand. If the church member is successful, the *ntwadisi* usually “jumps” the person in the air three times. The person’s purity of spirit is determined by the height of the jumps. For more on the *bascule*, see Covington-Ward (2016) or MacGaffey (1983).

14. A *nkisi* is a special object or group of objects that hold a sacred medicine and are imbued with spiritual power.

15. Such beliefs about a life force present in blood clarify why the process of drying out or mummifying a body, in particular the bodies of chiefs and kings, was so important

in the past. The body was dried out over a fire until all of the internal liquids disappeared (Jacobson-Widding 1979, 307), a process that took from several months to a year. Not until this process was complete was the body officially dead, and the now-mummified body wrapped and buried, sometimes in a large figure made out of cloth, called a Niombo. For more information about Niombo figures and mummification, see Widman (1967).

16. Much has been written about menstrual taboos in different contexts, including in religious spaces and worship. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, by Mary Douglas (1966), examines menstrual blood as well as many other substances considered polluting and dangerous in different societies.

17. While at the time I did not ask where Luvuvamu was located, there is a village called Luvuvamu in Songololo Territory in Kongo Central/Lower Congo.

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