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FORGETFUL REMEMBERING: A COLONIAL LIFE IN THE CONGO

Johannes Fabian

MEMORY: REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

When I was recently invited to talk about 'Forgetting Africa', I began by pointing out that the phrase entailed a performative contradiction. By pronouncing it, we negate what it seems to affirm. In plain words, we remember Africa when we talk about forgetting Africa. Giving this insight more thought, something occurred to me that I found at first quite disturbing: is it not inherently contradictory to use 'forgetting' as a transitive verb designating an action that has an object? The contradiction lies between the *negation* expressed in a verb whose meaning is constituted in opposition to remembering and the *affirmation* of some content that is being forgotten. I am sure logicians have a solution for this problem but as an ethnographer and anthropologist trying to understand what forgetting means when I encounter it in my work, it is neither my task nor my concern to analyse the logical status of concepts or statements. I want to understand the pragmatics of speech, the ways language articulates with action in practices that perform what, with all the misigivings we may have about the term, we continue to call culture.

Specifically I have been concerned with 'forgetting' in the context of several projects of research devoted to documenting and interpreting popular historiology, a term designed to cover both written and oral accounts, narration of history as well as metahistorical principles that account for the specific shape of shared memory.[1] The adjective 'popular' signals a contrast with academic historiography and, above all, the fact that such historiology is part of contemporary African culture I have been studying, since the mid-1960s, in the urban-industrial region of Shaba/Katanga in Zaire/Congo.[2]

Social memory, cultural memory, culture as memory, and memory as culture, landscape and memory, places of memory, regimes of memory—all these have been prominent topics in cultural studies, also in anthropology. I contributed to several of them but I found myself getting more and more uneasy with tendencies to ascribe to memory

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[1] As far as I know, 'historiology' was first proposed as a term more encompassing than 'historiography' by Jan Vansina (1986: 109). See also Fabian (2001a: 78 and index).

[2] I might add that attentiveness to memory within a culture inevitably leads one to wonder about memory in relations between cultures and, indeed, its epistemological status in anthropological theory where it gives rise to questions regarding memory and alterity (Fabian, 1999).

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and remembering predominantly positive value (often stressing the integrative, normative, and symbolic functions of shared memory, to a point where the concept becomes interchangeable with culture). This did not fit what I found out in studies of popular religion, theatre, song, or history writing, where remembering clearly was critical, contestatory, and at times subversive.[3] Not only that: not only could memories have critical *effects*; what I found was that remembering in the sense of *producing memory* that could be narrated, exhibited, performed, in short, shared, required critical work. Such work had to be carried out in a field of tensions between positing and negating. I began to speak of memory work, a dialectical notion, I believe, that makes it possible to think remembering and forgetting together and thus avoid the kind of positivity that results in conceptual entropy.

So, the way I propose to think about forgetting is not:

memory = remembering

vs.

forgetting = not-remembering

But

memory

requiring

memory work

carried out as

remembering and forgetting[4]

Let me, before I show how this idea can work in the practice of interpreting popular memory, try to make the general thesis a little more concrete by disputing two assertions that at first appear self-evident:

You either remember or you don't

In this view, memories can either be called up, produced, or not. Not-remembering means factual absence—but absence of what? Of persons, places, events, or dates that make up a story to be told? Of images to be pictured? Of smells and moods to be evoked? When one asks, again within this frame, for more than the mere fact of absence; when reasons, causes, conditions, circumstances of not-remembering are sought, one moves to another level, that of assigning explanations, such as incapacity for retrieval (perhaps due to age),

[3] See also the work of Bogumil Jewsiewicki (1988) to cite but one of his earlier essays on the subject.

[4] In a comprehensive critical survey of the literature of the last decade (with a focus on Europe and the US) Kansteiner (2002) argues for a similar trifold model of collective memory.

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lack of concentration, conscious or unconscious suppression. Such an approach is legitimate when the aim is to inquire into (identify, measure) remembering as a cognitive capacity. But it precludes the possibility of thinking about remembering and forgetting on the same level, either as but two aspects of the same mental/communicative activity, or as two activities that coexist (in conflict or not). It seems to me that we need to assume that possibility—*you remember and you don't*—if our aim is to understand forgetting as it is documented in the texts and protocols of stories and conversations that make up the 'data' of research that is interpretive and historical rather than clinical.

You either tell (what you remember) or you don't

If remembering and forgetting as mental/communicative acts are in a dialectical relationship, one may assume a priori that there is no narration as remembering that is not also narration as forgetting. But surely, it must be possible to diagnose *a posteriori* that the narrator of a given narrative has forgotten things he could or should have remembered? Yes, but only up to a point. If the issue about forgetting were content—that which is being forgotten—such a diagnosis would ultimately presuppose an omniscient analyst. Proximately it would of course be sufficient to share enough common memories with a narrator, or to know enough recorded history, to be able to remind him of things he forgets to tell. But establishing lists of items forgotten is not what we are after when we raise forgetting as a theoretical issue. Not forgotten content but forgetting as an act should preoccupy us.

The problem of forgetting may be analogous to the one we face in ethnographic studies of secrecy. As far as I can see, the current consensus is something like this: secrecy is not simply the hiding of certain activities or kinds of knowledge, hence their absence from a public arena. Secrets are not things un-known but things known or performed in a special way; secrecy is not the absence of communication but a certain kind of communication. Secret things—the content of myths and doctrines, certain ritual performances and their paraphernalia (places, masks, dances)—may in fact be common knowledge but that does not affect their secret status as long as a community keeps to rules that acknowledge secrecy as one form of communication, one cultural practice, among others.[5]

Methodologically, and applied to the manifestations of remembering and forgetting I find in the texts I study, this means that we must search our material for evidence that is likely to show up above all in forms of narration and features of text.

[5] For an earlier and a recent example of ethnographic studies of secrecy see Bellman (1984) and de Jong (2001).

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ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

A text

Technological developments have made a conventional task—to base arguments and reflections on empirical evidence and to show what that evidence consists of—both much easier and much more challenging. This paper is being presented with the assumption that the text to be interpreted is accessible[6] on an internet website: www2.fmg.uva.nl/lpca.

The reader can find there the complete transcript of a conversation in (French and Swahili, translated into English) recorded in Lubumbashi on 8 July 1986. Participants were Baba Ngoie-Nday Léon, a pioneer in the history of the town, the author, and Kalundi Mango, the author's fatherly friend and occasional research assistant. In addition to the transcript and translation the website contains annotations (historical, linguistic, and otherwise explanatory) to the text (see 'The times of the *Vocabulaire*: Commentary[7] on a conversation with Baba Ngoie Léon').

The availability of texts and commentaries on the internet has two advantages. First, it answers, at least as much as this is ever possible in text-centred ethnography, questions of representativity. At the very least it shows that the principal text is part of a corpus, that this corpus documents shared practices of remembering, and that these practices are in turn part of a larger context of memory work within a popular culture. Second, the internet gives to ethnographic material a new kind of presence and this, as I have argued elsewhere, is bound to have consequences for the literary form of ethnographic writing (Fabian, 2002). As yet we don't know precisely what these consequences will be. The interpretations and findings that follow might help us to find out.

The recorded event

It is one thing to affirm that memory is work, it is another to prevent this plausible conception from becoming cover-all. 'Work' as opposed to, different from, what? To me, the term is meaningful if it signals at least the following conditions: the ethnographer must be able to catch memory 'at work' and he must document this by means of 'texts'. Ordinarily, the ethnographer does not *find* such texts; they must be *made* by means of recording communicative–performative events that become protocols when they are transcribed and translated. Thus, work—hard work—is required before memory work can be presented and interpreted.

This is also the case in situations (no longer as extraordinary as we once thought) where written texts are produced by those whose

[6] Readers without access to the internet may obtain a hard copy of the conversation with Baba Ngoie Léon (transcript and translation) by writing to: Dr Vincent de Rooij, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, O.Z. Achterburgwal 185, 1012 DK Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

[7] This commentary served as a quarry for the present paper. Several passages were simply taken over but there remains a difference in that the commentary closely follows the original text whereas this essay has an agenda dictated by its topic.

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memory work we want to study. Because anthropology's distinctive task is to study practices, culture-in-action, such texts become objects of ethnography not simply as tokens of a known culture (or 'literature', or 'tradition'). They need to be worked on, linked metonymically, not just metaphorically, to practices of literacy. Such literary practices cannot be understood adequately, and sometimes not at all, unless the ethnographer has access, by more or less competent participation, to practices of orality that exist in the society under investigation.

All this came together when the meeting with Baba Ngoie was recorded and eventually presented as a document.[8] As far as its form is concerned, the text before us is a hybrid; it hovers between the genres of interview/interrogation (the initial purpose was to fill gaps of information that showed up in the work of translating the *Vocabulaire*), conversation (exchanges that did not follow a specific agenda), and narrative (stories, prompted or not). It could be said that this particular instance of an ethnography of memory work makes the interplay between remembering and forgetting visible in its textual shape. Forms were 'mixed' because tasks were taken up and abandoned, purposes were envisaged and not pursued, questions were asked but often answers did not match the questions, information was elicited but did not come forth, statements were begun and not finished; there were silences, pauses, multiple starts and repetitions—all this added up to a cumbersome document whose significance, I must admit, eluded me until I began to pay attention to the role that forgetting plays in the work of memory at all stages, including that of its ethnographic documentation.

Language choice

In fact the dialectic of recalling and not-recalling (or perhaps better: of sharing, and not-sharing, memories) was in this case set into motion before the recording began. It happened when Baba Ngoie decided to speak French. Among the many conversations with Africans I had recorded since my first stay in Shaba/Katanga in the sixties, only one or two had included longer passages in French, none had been conducted in that language entirely. Baba Ngoie's choice of French as

[8] Baba Ngoie is the local form of respectful address; his official name is Ngoie-(N)day Léon. The meeting was originally organised to seek his help with certain points of detail and problems regarding the editing and translating of a written (mimeographed) popular history of Lubumbashi, the *Vocabulaire de ville de Elisabethville*. A facsimile of this document (in Swahili), a transliteration of the text in Shaba/Katanga Swahili, an English translation and notes are also available on the website, as well as in a published edition (Fabian, 1990). Furthermore, the website contains an edited transcript in Swahili with an English translation of exchanges between the author and Kalundi Mango, recorded between 17 and 27 June 1986 in Lubumbashi while working on the translation of the *Vocabulaire*, as well as a commentary on Kalundi's comments. These texts are deposited in a section of the website entitled 'Archives of Popular Swahili' where additional material may be found (and will be added to in the future). Most relevant for the present purpose is the complete transcript (in Swahili with an English translation) of narratives and conversations between the author and the popular painter and historian Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. Edited portions of this text in English accompanied the presentation of 101 paintings that made up his 'History of Zaire' (see Fabian, 1996).

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the linguistic medium of our exchange was part of a message he wanted to convey. At the very least, French marked a certain distance *vis-à-vis* the *Vocabulaire*, the document (written in Swahili) that was the occasion for our meeting and remained a reference throughout our conversation. Quite likely he also intended to keep his distance (and dignity) by avoiding the familiarity, even complicity, that popular Swahili creates among its speakers.

Would what Baba Ngoie recollected for us have been different in substance, not only in form, had we spoken Swahili rather than French? Because we don't have the recording of another conversation with him in Swahili that could serve for comparison, the question may seem moot. However, long experience of conversing in Swahili with speakers who could have used French has convinced me that the difference may be significant. If the aim of ethnographic questioning had been only to get information, and if language were a mere vehicle of information, I probably could have conducted my research in French. I would have remained unaware that Swahili—in this specific context—is not just another language but a significant medium for another mode of communication giving us access to experience, knowledge and, indeed, memories that would be articulated differently in French, and perhaps not at all. Now, if a certain linguistic medium (a language, but it could also be just register or way of speaking) predisposes you to leave unsaid what you would tell in another, then the question I asked elsewhere (Fabian, 2001b: 18)—'does remembering (and forgetting) speak a language?'—makes sense.[9]

MEMORY WORK

The history of a life and the history of a town

This paper began with a discussion of concepts we need when we argue for a dialectical approach that allows us to think remembering and forgetting together as two aspects of memory work as a cultural praxis. Then we introduced the ethnographic evidence on which this paper is based—a text (and its con-texts), the circumstances of its production, and the linguistic medium. With that we are now prepared to demonstrate our approach with specific examples.

Forgetting thematised

The memory work that is documented in this text becomes all the more interesting because Baba Ngoie makes forgetting itself a topic. Comparison shows a remarkable difference between Baba Ngoie's

[9] I feel even more strongly about this after a conversation I had recently (April 2002) in Zanzibar with a Congolese painter who had left Katanga in 1960. In this case, it was switching from the East Coast Swahili of his present environment to the Shaba/Katanga Swahili of his youth that opened a stream of memories in an exchange that had at first been rather unpromising.

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recollections and Kalundi's comments on the *Vocabulaire*. At least in the passages that were selected for the website, Kalundi never invoked forgetting when he could not come up with information I had asked for. His response would be: 'I don't know [about that]'. Was his attitude toward forgetting due only to difference in age or temperament? Kalundi was in his late sixties when we talked and he tended to be assertive, often authoritative, in his role as informant. Baba Ngoie repeatedly reminded us of his age and of the difficulties he had in recalling names and events because of the many years that had passed. His age certainly entitled him to such claims but there was more, or something else, behind Baba Ngoie's foregrounding of forgetting. I suspect that it expressed his resolve to put his own biography in the centre of our conversation and not the ethnographer's questions regarding the history of Lubumbashi as reported in the *Vocabulaire*.

That he prefers paraphrases to the verb *oublier*, which he only uses once, makes his concern even more conspicuous. Just in one paragraph (14) of the text we find these assertions of forgetfulness:

> parce-que il y a: il y a la partie un peu de la connaissance qui est diminuée à cause de mon âge.

Notice he says *connaissance* not *mémoire*. This is interesting for two reasons. First, memory is here recognised as a cognitive faculty and, by implication, being questioned about memories (rather than being allowed simply to tell stories that come to his mind) resembles an examination that makes demands on performance. Second, there is the qualification '*un peu*' which also occurs in these phrases from the same paragraph:

> parce-que il y a beaucoup de jours: je crois que j'ai: un peu oublié.
>
> on parlait de ça: mais il ya longtemps: il y a quelque chose qui est un peu sautée.

and one more time in paragraph 23:

> je vous dis: avec le temps: avec le temps: les choses sont un peu diminuées.

In other words, to him forgetting is not an either-or, there are degrees. Some memories may get lost (*sauter*, 'jump'), or, as the equivalent Swahili verb *-ruka* can be translated, 'fly up and away'; others are *diminuées* ('diminished'). That there may be more to '*un peu*' than a certain quaintness of expression is suggested by an analogous idiomatic expression in local Swahili, often cited as an idea peculiar to 'Bantu' thinking: *kufa kidogo* ('to die a little') as opposed to *kufa lote* ('to die completely'), said, for instance, of a car that broke down but can be fixed (as opposed to a car that is beyond repair).

There are moments, however, when Baba Ngoie sounds less tentative. He insists that old age is to blame for having forgotten *beaucoup* ('a lot'), rather than just a little:

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mon âge: eh: a mangé beaucoup: a laissé beaucoup tomber. [para. 20]

Notice that in this sentence *âge* is not only the grammatical subject but the agent (who forgets). Again, there is more to this expression than what may be apparent at first. In this cultural context a translation such as 'age has eaten away memory' would not do justice to the semantics of *manger* ('eating'). In the Bantu languages Baba Ngoie speaks, 'eating' (*kula* or *kulia* in Swahili and *kudya* in kiLuba) is an omnipresent metaphor of ingestion and fulfilment (power is 'eaten', so is an office, but also friendship) and we now get, more clearly than elsewhere, a glimpse of what old age can mean when Baba Ngoie invokes it: it may be at the same time a plea for indulgence *and* a demand for respect (explicitly so in paragraph 27).

Consider also the following statement where forgetting is ascribed not to an absence but to an overload of memories:

N: mais je rappele plus ce qui c'est passé: il y a beaucoup. . .

F: oui oui.

N: il y a beaucoup dans la tête: je me rap: je me rap[pele] plus/ je me rappele plus. [para. 23]

And when he says, in the second part of the phrase quoted earlier, '*[mon âge] a laissé beaucoup tomber*', this may very well be an echo of a French expression: *laisse tomber!* ('forget it!')—a conversational figure that is a demand to remember that one should forget.

In recent writings about memory, emphasis has often been on *lieux de mémoire* and the many ways shared memories are tied to places. Tshibumba's *History of Zaire* and especially the *Vocabulaire* confirm this and so do some of Baba Ngoie's recollections. But our earlier observation on analogies between forgetting and dying and, above all, the many references he makes to old age and hearing problems bring something else into focus: remembering and forgetting are also dialectically related as *bodily* functions. And that may be another good reason to see both involved in memory as work.

Remembering/forgetting narrated

Under the guiding concept of memory work, remembering can be thought together with forgetting. One way, though not the only one, in which memory work becomes accessible for study is through narration;[10] memories—even the briefest flashes of recollection—probably cannot be put into words except as stories. Names of persons or places, certain poems, mathematical or magic fomulae may count as non-narrative kinds of speech but if they are to be 'remembered in communication' (which could be another definition of memory work) they must be invoked in frames that include agents, actions or practices,

[10] Other ways include photographs, paintings, and other items of material culture, but also visual productions, theatrical, or ritual performances.

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and events. If this is so, it follows that our search for instances of forgetting should include, beyond the cases where forgetting itself is made a topic, features of narration that reveal the interplay of remembering and forgetting. Such features can be identified in our text and I will discuss some and show how they become narratively operative.

Leaps and gaps, et cetera

Most conspicuous are gaps Baba Ngoie leaves open when he recalls his life history. The recording begins with an account of his school years in Kisangani, away from his home, and continues with his return to Katanga and his search for employment. In 1923, Baba Ngoie was hired as the first Congolese clerk by the Elisabethville branch of the Banque du Congo Belge. This made him a pioneer in the history of the town and earned him his place in the *Vocabulaire*. He was to hold this job for thirty-nine years until he retired in 1962. It may be that stability, the experience of steady, secure work, accounts for the leap he takes in his narrative when, within one sentence, he gets from 1923 to the present:

> jusqu'à ces jours: je suis à Lubum: à Elisabethville/tout-ce que on a fait ici: changé: des . . . ? . . . devenus comme ceci comme cela/eh bien: toujours en ma présence. [para. 5]

This was his way of declaring that he had been a witness to almost the entire period remembered in the *Vocabulaire* but it also sounded like the end of the story he was going to tell us. So I tried to put in a question in order to keep the conversation going. But despite the added emphasis I expressed when I addressed him in Swahili as *baba*, he did not hear me (or ignored my attempt) and continued, first by repeating the leap (this time getting to 1960, the year of Independence; we will come back to this) and then by filling the gap in a most ingenious way. Rather than spreading, as it were, his memories over those decades, he gathers them around a few objects: the four medals he had earned at the end of Belgian rule (para. 6). Three of them—for service at the bank—he only mentions, while the fourth one, a war medal, makes him embark on the story of his work for the military on the home front in Elisabethville during the Second World War.[11] Though he saw no combat it appears that, much as for many former soldiers, the war occupied an inordinately important space among his memories. About the subsequent period, from 1945 until his retirement in 1962, he has little more to say than that he continued to work at the bank.

[11] More could be said about the role objects played as reminders (*ukumbusho* in local Swahili) in this conversation. This was generally the case of the *Vocabulaire* which, as an object in our hands, constantly served as a source of questions and topics. More specifically, it is illustrated in paragraph 22 of this text. Baba Ngoie had brought along photographs and various documents and he must have decided that now was the moment to show them. There were papers attesting his baptism in Kisangani, his marriage to *mama* Madeline, and above all photos of the two of his children he was most proud of, a daughter who became a superior in a nuns' order and a son who worked as a telecommunications engineer in Kinshasa.

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As I said, at the end of paragraph 5 he seemed ready to conclude what he had to tell us, but then he continued, at the beginning of paragraph 6, with this remarkable statement:

> donc: il était mille neuf cents soixante/ mm/ on dit [claps] vous au**l**ez: l'indépendance:

Here he joins his biography to a crucial event in political history such that he leaves in his recollections a gap of almost forty years. This period covers, except for a dozen years, almost the entire history of Elisabethville prior to Independence. The leap he takes is foregrounded by the way he begins the sentence just quoted: *donc*, a conjunction that introduces a date (1960) and an event (Independence) as a consequence of what preceded it. This matter-of-fact progress of the narrative is in stark contrast to what it omits from Baba Ngoie's life history. Here we seem to have an instance of forgetting that makes this particular narrative possible (the paradox to which I alluded earlier). Jumping from 1923 to 1960 allows the narrator to join what counts for him, namely his beginnings and the recognition he received when he was young, and an ending, a political event close to his retirement, yet in the very act of remembering beginnings and end, the narrative erases large portions of his remembered life.[12]

A search of the text reveals that *donc* occurs two more times in similar functions. It marks the end of an episode or a summary statement:

> donc depuis lors: je n'ai plus **l**etourné au village/ [para. 7]
>
> donc: tout ça: à Lu: à Elisabethville/ [para. 22]

It should be noted that the temporal adverb *alors* could have a function similar to *donc* and there are several cases in this text where such equivalence could be argued for, for instance:

> alors: je suis parti de Kisangani: pour venir: à Lubumbashi: à Elisabethville/ [para. 2]
>
> alors/ eh bien: j'ai quitté l'Union Minière/ [para. 4]
>
> alors: si je dis ça: je les félicite: avant tout: les premiers: et puis tout le monde/ [para. 21]

However, *alors* occurs about thirty times and it is clear that it most often signals the continuation of a narrative episode rather than its conclusion and that it does not mark the leaps I qualified as a kind of forgetting that allows the narrator to move on.

If it is legitimate to consider leaving out what could be remembered as forgetting, then *etcetera*, a phrase Baba Ngoie uses frequently

[12] Quite likely his silence had political reasons (see also below on 'mythification'). The politicisation of post-colonial memory is explored in a collection of essays edited and introduced by R. Werbner (1998) where many important references that are also relevant to this paper may be found.

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(about twenty times, not counting repetitions; the closely related *tout ça* occurs nine times) appears in a different light. In the English version I left *etcetera* untranslated or used paraphrases such as 'to give you an example', 'you know', or 'if you know what I mean'. In conversational analysis, *etcetera* would be qualified as a 'filler', a sort of interjection without apparent semantic value. But in a narrative essentially devoted to calling up memories one should acknowledge that fillers, after all, signal gaps, omissions, and, at the very least, abbreviations. In that case, *etcetera* points to forgetting as an activity that goes together with remembering.

THE TYPICAL AND THE MYTHICAL

I now want to direct attention to features of our text that are perhaps less obvious but should be counted among the ways in which remembering and forgetting become operative in narration.

The first one could be called *typification*. We cannot help but notice that the various parts of narrative that Baba Ngoie elected to tell us (in paras. 1–7) add up to a remarkably thin story of his life. Despite occasional flashes of the concrete—memories that help us to imagine some of the stations of his life—what he reports is the biography of a strangely abstract colonial subject. His life moves through typical stations: recruitment from a rural area, school, move to town, employment, service, retirement. We are (as yet) told nothing about his marriage, children, friends, his joys and frustrations, let alone economic hardship, bureaucratic chicanery, and racist humiliation. From Baba Ngoie we would have learned almost nothing about daily life in Elisabethville/Lubumbashi if we had not asked him repeatedly to comment on detail that we found in the *Vocabulaire*. Even then he often acted almost as if he felt cornered or embarrassed by certain memories. More than once he claims forgetfulness to take his distance from popular ways of survival under, and resistance to, colonial rule. When asked about the African nicknames given to certain Belgian administrators and other officials he is of little help. As far as our interest in establishing the exact name/identity of persons that appear on the *Vocabulaire*'s lists is concerned, his memory fails, he has forgotten. But notice his remark regarding the reason: not old age (as elsewhere) but lack of interest in popular sobriquets *at the time*.

> je ne faisais pas beaucoup attention. [para. 13]

Here he takes a stance comparable to one that Kalundi took when I questioned him about popular Swahili in Elisabethville/Lubumbashi.[13] In both cases, professed disinterest should be interpreted as 'forgetting

[13] I discuss this in the section on 'Language and content of the *Vocabulaire*' in my commentary on Kalundi's comments on that document (see our website).

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with a purpose/reason/motive'. Taking distance from popular practices serves Kalundi and Ngoie to indicate—and thereby to remember—one of the ways by which they defined their place in this society (and their position towards the ethnographer, see also our remarks above about why Baba Ngoie chose to speak in French).

Another, related, attitude shows up when Baba Ngoie responds to questions regarding names and nicknames with a laconic '*c'est possible*' (twice) and, in the same sense, '*peut-être*' (once). Such apparently evasive phrases, I believe, express not only lack of commitment to our inquiry but also distantiation from the subject matter of that inquiry (popular naming practices as part of popular communication). Something like that must have been at play when we took up one of the most interesting chapters of the *Vocabulaire* in which the Great Depression is remembered as a time people survived because they helped each other and because they sought diversion in social associations and activities, among them the famed *malinga*, a craze for ballroom dancing. Baba Ngoie seemed to have difficulties even recognising the local terms *kilisi* (the Depression, from French *crise*) and *malinga*. When, to help his memory, Kalundi switches to Swahili and provides a list of some of the (ethnic) names of these dance bands,[14] Baba Ngoie responds with a disappointing '*c'est possible*' (para. 17).

As he had done earlier he pronounced this phrase as if to say: 'Maybe, but so what? This is nothing I have an opinion on...' Still, for a person who lived in Elisabethville as a young adult during the late twenties and early thirties, not immediately to recognise the term *malinga* would seem to be a major case of forgetting. Or, if this expresses Baba Ngoie's stance commented on earlier, of 'keeping apart' from the world of popular culture that surrounded him, does it mean that he spent much of his life *forgetting the present*? Had he been so much involved with his individual identity that he had no place among his memories for collective experiences that would have tainted his self-image of a well-adapted *petit bourgeois*? Did the typification that such an image required make him forget precisely what his contemporaries vividly remembered?

Much speaks for such an interpretation and if we may also assume the Baba Ngoie was not unique in this respect, his case may be a salutary reminder: the artistic and performative creations of a vigorous urban culture were not of equal importance to all Africans as a means of survival. Some drew on other resources (such as official religion and literacy, see below) and pursued another kind of modernity that was moral–ascetic and individual rather than aesthetic–ecstatic and collective. Many modern Africans—people like Baba Ngoie—lived and died righteously. They achieved a measure of professional and economic security and succeeded in raising children who followed their example. Others led dissipated lives, struggling for survival most of the time; yet they left to their community sights and sounds, images, tunes, and

[14] See also Kalundi's own account of *malinga* in his comments on the *Vocabulaire* on our website.

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stories by which not only they but their times could be remembered collectively. Many of their creations are now counted among the world's treasures of the visual and verbal arts and music.

Perhaps there is still more to Baba Ngoie's '*c'est possible*'. It may mark a narrative stance equidistant from remembering and forgetting. In this part of our conversation the phrase did not close the exchange but left us an opening, which we found when we asked Baba Ngoie instead of a socio-historical a personal question (end of paragraph 17): did *he* ever dance the *malinga*? There we seem to have caught him. Reluctantly and not without causing some amusement, he admits to, or uncovers, memories of having danced the *malinga*, after all. We laugh at his evasiveness. He keeps a hedge and hides behind a conjecture: if it was generally done, he must have done it too.

Typification causes Baba Ngoie to sacrifice—to forget—detail and concreteness in his life history. This is reinforced by a second narrative feature, *mythification*. He introduces this device (at the end of paragraph 20 and in paragraph 21) when he reflects on 'the revolution', a shorthand term for the state of affairs under Mobutu's regime. He does this by means of comparison, not between the past and the present but between 'beginnings' and what became of them. This allows him to 'forget' the narrow and politically dangerous frame of the present and to move to more fundamental reflections on the course of life and history.

The effort it takes him to make that move away from Mobutu's overpowering presence shows up in his speech:

> et: si: si: la volu: la **l**évolution d'aujourd'hui: mettons: laissez-moi vous p: vous parler: si je me trompe: ce n'est pas parce-que [je] veux:
>
> non: je vous dis: la façon: aujourd'hui [pause]: nous avons la **l**évolution/ mais: il y a eu les commencements/ [para. 21]

Baba Ngoie has trouble formulating a coherent statement. Does his French fail him because he is getting tired? Perhaps. But, as the following shows, his speech, bungled as it may be on the surface, reflects increased awareness and attention instead of failing concentration. Talk like this is not rare among his contemporaries; it is a linguistic icon of the political 'shuffle and dance' people are forced to put on when they want to talk about a regime and its 'revolution', symbolised in daily life by *salongo* ('obligatory, party-supervised community cleaning'), *animation* ('praise-singing and dancing at every political meeting'), party emblems and slogans everywhere, dress rules for all. Who can talk straight when even using Belgian rather than French ways of counting ('*septante-deux*', not '*soixante-douze*') could be denounced as anti-revolutionary?

To repeat, it is apprehensiveness that makes Baba Ngoie start, stop, repair, and start again when he talks about Mobutu's revolution but also when he wants us to understand what the revolution should be compared to: 'the beginning(s)' (of colonisation), the times when civilisation was brought to the Congo. Having spoken his mind he is both relieved and defiant: '*la vérité avant tout*'. Kalundi must have

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felt that Baba Ngoie showed great courage: 'Did you catch this?' he asked me.

When we returned to questioning Baba Ngoie about the *Vocabulaire* (paras. 24 and 25) he acknowledged that the houseboys who sponsored the *Vocabulaire* deserved to be 'congratulated' and that they also belonged to what he had called earlier 'beginnings'. What they and others had achieved was to make of people 'men', to form them such that they became humans. Statements like these, I think, support what we said about myth in Baba Ngoie's story. Reflection on the 'revolution' propelled his memories to a past he mythifies. That mythical past leads him to view much of the present as forgettable:

> aujourd'hui: nous avons beaucoup **l**es hommes: mmm: [pause] et: grade zéro/ pour moi. . .[para. 25]

Why this strange, negative formula? What makes him call many people of today something like 'non-entities'? Is this the predictable topos of nostalgia for colonial times (that made the *Vocabulaire* curse Independence)? Is it just the misanthropy of an old man? Certainly not the latter. There are things Baba Ngoie enjoys and can be proud of '*aujourd'hui*' (his life, his family, see para. 27) and when he talks positively about the colonial past he does not, as would be typical of mere nostalgia, wallow in regrets and vague feelings but speaks his mind in a manner that rubs us—postcolonial critics of the Belgian *œuvre civilisatrice*—up the wrong way:

> N: je félicite [pause] mon civilisateur: eh les: surtout les premières/
>
> F: oui/

Baba Ngoie's bluntness impresses Kalundi. That I acknowledge the statement with a simple '*oui*', seems to disturb Kalundi and he makes sure I got the point: '*civilisateurs ce sont des blancs*'. Baba Ngoie ends this section with an adage summarising what they taught him (apart from '*savoir vivre*', literacy, and '*le goût de savoir*'):

> ne pas accepter/ [pause] subir: ne pas vouloi**l**/

An intriguing statement. On the surface, it may be taken to show just how much Baba Ngoie internalised colonial submissiveness. On a deeper level it looks as if he had matched mythification of the past with the stance of a mystic who has found peace by abandoning—forgetting—desire.

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ABSTRACT

Social memory, cultural memory, culture as memory, and memory as culture, landscape and memory, places of memory, regimes of memory—all these have been prominent topics in cultural studies, also in anthropology; in this work, attention is usually paid to remembering. Based on several prior inquiries into popular historiography and local regimes of memory, this paper is an attempt to include forgetting in a model of 'memory work'. What this entails is shown with ethnographic evidence, the recording of a conversation made in Lubumbashi in 1986 with one of the African pioneers of the town. The text in French and Swahili, accompanied by an English translation, is accessible at www2.fmg.uva.nl/lpca.

RÉSUMÉ

Mémoire sociale, mémoire culturelle, la culture en tant que mémoire et la mémoire en tant que culture, paysage et mémoire, lieux de mémoire, régimes de mémoire—autant de grands thèmes traités par les études culturelles ou l'anthropologie; ces travaux s'intéressent généralement au souvenir. À partir d'enquêtes sur l'historiographie populaire et les régimes de mémoire locaux, cet article tente d'inclure l'oubli dans un modèle de «travail de mémoire».

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Ce travail repose sur des données ethnographiques, l'enregistrement d'une conversation menée à Lubumbashi en 1986 avec l'un des pionniers africains de la ville. Le texte en français et swahili, accompagné d'une traduction anglaise, est disponible à www2.fmg.uva.nl/lpca.

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