Out of Our Minds

Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa

1: Introduction

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For Gabi and Anna,
who give me a home to return to
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Introduction

When I retrace the steps that led me to embark on this project, I must begin with a few remarks about my previous work. Trained in anthropology, I have done field research and written about contemporary African culture in the urban and industrial region of Shaba, in southeastern Zaire. Disciplinary divisions and the strong sociological outlook that characterized even cultural anthropology may account for the fact that it took years before I realized I needed to place my work in the context of colonial history. Knowledge of the colonial past was essential for me to understand, among other things, a problem that intrigued me more and more: how did it come about that Swahili, a language that had its origins on the east coast of Africa, would emerge, in different variants, as both a tool of Belgian colonization and a “weapon of resistance”—that is, as the common medium through which displaced labor recruits and other immigrants created spaces of freedom for the vital and complex popular culture I first encountered in the sixties?

Sometime in the late seventies I began to search more purposefully for evidence of a colonial history of Swahili. I looked for early vocabularies, grammars, phrase books, and primers written for use in the Congo Free State, which became the Belgian Congo in 1908. It turned out that the earliest instances of these genres of linguistic appropriation could be found (often as appendices) in travelogues, and by chance, in the library of my institute, I came upon a truly remarkable example of such writing, Jérôme Becker’s *La vie en Afrique* (1887). I thus decided to begin

Map of central Africa, showing the main places named in the travelogues.
my project with a study of the uses of Swahili in this account of expeditions carried out for King Leopold's International African Association. For the sake of contrast, I also analyzed a contemporary account of missionary travel from the east coast to the Great Lakes, the White Fathers' *A l'assaut des pays noirs* (1884). I presented the results in a rather recondite long essay or small book, *Language on the Road* (1984), and this could have been the end of that particular excursion into history and literary interpretation. But the larger project of a colonial history of Shaba Swahili, which I had originally envisaged as not much more than an annotated bibliography, turned into a story that had to be told (*Language and Colonial Power* [1986; reprint 1991]).

A number of questions that came up in the course of my readings for these studies kept intriguing me even after the results were published. For instance, I could not let go of certain strange assertions that had got me hooked on Becker's account in the first place. Much like other early travelers (and later anthropologists), this author flaunted his authority by liberally larding his story with Swahili terms and phrases. This was an interesting feature, though not exceptional in itself. What made it so gripping was a comment of Becker's, in a chapter where he assumes the stance of the linguist: "The African, by the way, gets along with a very restricted choice of vocables. Three or four hundred words make up his usual glossary" (Becker 1887, 2:51).

This claim struck me as nonsense, even if it was meant to apply to a reduced variant of Swahili, a kind of trade language. Because I had by then formed a high opinion of Becker as a proto-ethnographer, the statement also made me mad, mad enough to comb the two volumes for terms and phrases that Becker himself used in the French text. What I found was that his own demonstrated knowledge of the language (let alone that of his African interlocutors), I could only conclude that Becker was "out of his mind" (as I put it to myself) when he labeled Swahili a poor language and even in situated, by the singular phrase "the African," that such poverty reflected reduced communicative capacities or needs on the part of its speakers. This, as best I can recall, was my first inking of the insights that would later crystallize in the title of the present study.

Other travelogues and early ethnographic reports of roughly the same period and region as Becker's opened another route that eventually converged with this line of thought. At the time I still had no clear program for systematic research, but my reading evoked an image, diffuse yet lively. There was something curious about a topos, presumably shared by these writers, their contemporary readers, and, I would maintain, most present-day readers as well, a topos that was to become emblematic for the history of exploration in the last third of the nineteenth century: that of the encounter between a European explorer, the intrepid leader of an expeditionary caravan and emissary of science, and the African chief, a local ruler (real or presumed) cast in the role of a representative of his society and culture and invariably identified as either a political friend or foe of European penetration. In numerous instances—sometimes explicitly noted, sometimes to be inferred from descriptions—the African potentate appeared in a state of more or less advanced inebriation, caused by drinking vast quantities of beer, palm wine, or mead and occasionally made worse (or better!) by smoking hemp. But what about his European guest? Though I cannot cite from the sources anything that would directly correspond to the reported states of African rulers (after all, explorers would not be likely to depict themselves in such a fashion), there is overwhelming indirect evidence that European travelers seldom met their hosts in a state we would expect of scientific explorers: clear-minded and self-controlled. More often than not, they too were "out of their minds" with extreme fatigue, fear, delusions of grandeur, and feelings ranging from anger to contempt. Much of the time they were in the thralls of "fever" and other tropical diseases, under the influence of alcohol or opium (laudanum, a tincture of alcohol and opium, was the principal drug used to control acute and chronic dysentery), high doses of quinine, arsenic, and other ingredients from the expedition's medicine chest. Luc de Heusch's *roi ivre* took on new meaning for me, and I thought there might be interesting material in these travelogues for a paper to be titled "Travel as Tripping."

As my initial enthusiasm about this discovery subsided—I began to doubt that I could come up with more than a somewhat sensationalist, muckraking, but in the end negligible piece—I kept mulling over possible wider implications. By 1990, I had collected my thoughts sufficiently to present them in a paper (unpublished) that was also a proposal for research. Here, assembled from my notes, is the gist of the emerging project: in popular as well as traditional scholarly opinion, the encounters that took place during European expansion were exemplary enactments
of our civilization. They were guided by self-denying missionary zeal and philanthropic compassion, as well as by a taste for travel and adventure, often combined with scientific curiosity. To be sure, the motives that brought individual travelers to Africa must be judged against a collective background that entailed territorial expansion, the pursuit of military power, commercial greed, and the need to find raw materials and investment opportunities for accumulated capital—not to mention the demands of an emerging "media industry" in search of stories to sell.

In all these explanations, the terms and the nature of the encounters with those about to be colonized are supposedly determined by motives and goals contained in (and therefore controlled by) faith and reason, as well as political and economic imperatives. This "containment" makes for histories of precolonial or colonial encounter that are predictable, their conclusions inescapable. As a result, the history of Western expansion becomes a celebration of said motives and goals, even in the writings of those who criticize, on moral or political grounds, the blatant misrepresentation and exploitation, that is not likely to shake in any fundamental way the belief we assert about our civilization. They were guided by self-denying missionary zeal and philanthropic compassion, as well as by a taste for travel and adventure, often combined with scientific curiosity.

One strategy adopted in recent years to counteract that self-fulfilling prophecy is to accumulate evidence for resistance to conquest and to write about that. This is a necessary task, and much more needs to be done to carry it out. But what will such efforts show? That imperialism was weaker than the image it liked to project, or less organized, or less rational? That the colonized reacted, survived, hung on? In that case, what we assert about them is still but a function of what we assert about ourselves. Even if we can point to deception, misrepresentation, and perhaps blindness in these encounters of exploration, conquest, and exploitation, that is not likely to shake in any fundamental way the belief we assert about our civilization. They were guided by self-denying missionary zeal and philanthropic compassion, as well as by a taste for travel and adventure, often combined with scientific curiosity.

A truly radical critique needs to address the very concept of rationality, especially the built-in tendency of that concept to present itself as inherent contradictory—indeed, anarchic—so much so that their true nature had to be concealed or, better, negated by projecting to the world images of a purposeful oeuvre civilisatrice: intrepid explorers mapping the unknown; saintly missionaries offering their lives for the salvation of pagans; heroic military men vanquishing an enemy that always out-numbered them; unselfish administrators toiling for the public good; and so forth. This colonial hagiography cannot simply be dismissed as pious legend. It represents a discourse that must be interpreted by reading it backward—from the rationalizations and glorifications to that which was thought to be in need of rationalization and glorification.

Intrepid, heroic, courageous: these were but some of the obligatory adjectives preceding the noun explorer. In the illustrations of travelogues, those verbal flourishes parallel pictorial ones: the traveler's quasi-military garb, his faraway gaze, his proud and determined posture. He rides or walks ahead of his caravan; a few porters and guards are recognizable, while the rest blend into a file that gets smaller and smaller until it disappears in the landscape. In these representations of explorers, traces of which we all have stored in our childhood memories (well, all of us above a certain age), the myth of science as an arduous battle for victory over self and nature has been condensed and concentrated; it is always available for consumption in a diluted form. The myth of scientific exploration, inasmuch as it supports our concept of ethnography, has come to us as an extract as well as an abstract of the experiences and practices it invokes. As an abstraction, the myth is in need of the kind of critique that addresses the limits and faults of representation; it calls for deconstructive literary analysis. As an extract, the myth contains "active ingredients" whose potency continues to affect modern ideas and practices of ethnography. It needs, if I may extend the pharmaceutical metaphor, an antidote, one distilled not from presumably superior "modern" ethnography but from a contemporary counterstory—one contained in the accounts of scientific travel and exploration we are about to consider.

In describing the myth, I may of course have projected my own preconceptions and stereotypes of African exploration. I acquired them, as many educated people have, through the powerful images created and widely circulated in travelogues and the countless rehearsals of these images in literature, art, and the media, as well as through mindless repetition of opinions about the impact of travel and exploration on the formation of anthropology. Recent critical discussion and revision in the literature on colonial travel brought certain doubts into focus and convinced me that an epistemological history of ethnography will prove essential to our understanding of the role of anthropology in the coming century, and of the need for its continued existence.
image and myth of Livingstone with which she grew up in her family and speaks of the "redundancy, discontinuity, and unreality" of such images in the literature on travel. The present study joins hers and other recent efforts to overcome the "numbing repetition" of stereotypes. I agree with Pratt's description of what needs to be done.

The effort must be, among other things, an exercise in humility. For one of the things it brings most forcefully into play are the contestatory expressions from the site of imperial intervention, long ignored in the metropolis; the critique of empire, coded ongoingly on the spot, in ceremony, dance, parody, philosophy, counterknowledge and counterhistory, in texts untried, suppressed, lost, or simply overlain with repetition and unreality. (1992, 2)

My approach differs in a few ways. I emphasize contradiction rather than contestation, though the two are of course related, and I do cite many examples of resistance. My aim is also more limited, because I address my critique to anthropology and, within anthropology, to ethnography, which is but one of the practices that originated with "imperial intervention." And I have certain reservations about adopting two of Pratt's theoretical concepts, "transculturation" and the "contact zone." Still, I hope that our efforts will be perceived as complementary.

There is a consensus among cultural anthropologists that ethnography, as empirical research that produces knowledge, justifies our claims to the status of an academic discipline. Modern practices of ethnography were developed from premises, activities, and conventions that guided scientific travel and exploration in the late nineteenth century. I do not subscribe to the widespread opinion that Bronislaw Malinowski instituted fieldwork as an obligatory practice. Others had carried out research in situ before him, and much of his theoretical orientation derived from the positivism inspired by Auguste Comte or Herbert Spencer, figures influential to the generation of explorers who preceded academic anthropologists.

Leszek Kolakowski (1969) characterized the classical, positivist understanding of science that also informed scientific exploration as "a collection of prohibitions concerning human knowledge" (9), expressing a "normative attitude" (4) that can be summed up in four rules.

1. The rule of phenomenalism: "We are entitled to record only that which is actually manifested in experience" (3).7

2. The rule of nominalism, stipulating that "we may not assume that any insight formulated in general terms can have any real refer-
Taking a view diametrically opposed to Lèvi-Strauss's, I hope to demonstrate that, especially in their first or early contacts with unfamiliar cultures, the emissaries of imperialism got to “that which is real” when they permitted themselves to be touched by lived experience. More often than not, those instances involved them in quandaries and contradictions, in moral puzzles and conflicting demands. What I find striking, and worthy of much more attention than it is usually given, is that explorers frequently overcame these intellectual and existential problems by stepping outside, and sometimes existing for long periods outside, the rationalized frames of exploration, be they faith, knowledge, profit, or domination. This “stepping outside” or “being outside” is what I call the ecstatic. In German, my first language and the one that intrudes whenever I struggle with the philosophical meaning of concepts, we have phrases like außer sich sein, “to be beside oneself,” and aus sich herausgehen, which my dictionary translates as “to come out of one's shell.” They elaborate further the meaning I am after: ecstasis can be an act as well as a state.

To avoid getting lost in a cloud of connotations, let me give some precision to the concept by rejecting most of the current meaning of ecstasy as nonrational, erratic, escapist, perhaps enthusiastic behavior (such as that described in, say, studies of cults and movements). Ecstasis, I shall assume, is not so much a kind of behavior but a dimension or quality of human action and interaction—one that creates a common ground for the encounters that will be the subject of this study. Unlike empathy (a concept frequently evoked in reflections on ethnographic fieldwork), ecstasis is neither a moral quality nor a psychological attitude; it is an epistemological concept. In the context of exploration, ecstasis was a “condition of possibility” for the meetings between Europeans and Africans to result in anything more than physical collision. Ecstasis, in a nontrivial understanding of the term, is (much like subjectivity) a prerequisite for, rather than an impediment to, the production of ethnographic knowledge.

In recent anthropology there has been much criticism of the disembodied scientific mind. The importance of gender has been recognized; senses other than vision have, as it were, been rehabilitated; emotions have received attention, and the body as a site of knowledge has been rediscovered. In the perspective opened up by these developments, a critical study of the objective conditions that determined knowledge of the Other as reported in travelogues and early ethnographies must consider the effects of alcohol, drugs, illness, sex, brutality, and terror, as well as the role of conviviality, friendship, play, and performance. Included in this approach are the sounds, movements, and objects that made up performances—music, dance, art, material culture, whatever mediated encounters and made it possible for the participants to transcend their psychological and social boundaries. Not only do the travelogues we shall examine offer plentiful documentation of all these elements, they also contain surprisingly articulate statements regarding their significance.
I. Shaba and Zaire were the official names throughout most of the time I worked in this region. Recent political developments resulted in the country's reverting to the name it had when I started my fieldwork in the 1960s: the Democratic Republic of the Congo. When referring to the colonial past or the recent present, I use the names Katanga and Congo instead of Shaba and Zaire (as the context requires).

2. I listed and counted only what linguists call "types," that is, the items of a (presumed) lexicon. In speech and writing a given type may yield any number, sometimes large numbers, of "tokens," or occurrences, and these I did not count. Now, after a second careful reading of Becker, I find that I had overlooked a substantial number of tokens, perhaps as many as fifty, which increases my earlier vocabulary by some 10 percent.

3. Luc de Heusch explored this motif in a study of the origin of the state in Africa (1972).

4. For a recent critique of this resistance perspective and its consequences for conceptions of ethnography, see Ortner 1995.

5. Mark Hobart formulated a similar demand, if I understand him correctly, in a witty, acerbic essay titled "Ethnography as a Practice" (1996). His mythopoetic place is Bali, not central Africa, and his perspective on developments in American anthropology is somewhat more European and more negative than mine, but his arguments are congenial to what I hope to accomplish in this study.

6. Works too numerous to cite here have contributed to a history of ethnography as part of the history of anthropology, an endeavor led by George W. Stocking. But only a few of their authors (such as Marshall Sahlins and Jan Vansina) have done ethnographic research themselves. Also relevant for episte-
mological approaches to the history of anthropology is work in the history and philosophy of science that uses ethnographic methods.

7. Notice that his injunction does not problematize "experience," which is precisely what we want to do. The rule refers to the empiricist element in positivism. Experience should be understood as whatever enters the Lockean "empty cabinet" of the mind through the senses, with the eye as the most reliable, hence most "noble," of the senses (on this visualist orientation in anthropology see Fabian 1985, ch. 4).

8. See, for instance, Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993). I take the opportunity to acknowledge much overlap in our approaches to the effects of colonialism on the production of knowledge.

9. *Notes and Queries*, first published in 1842—at the beginning of the period we cover—will be discussed in chapter 8.

10. Readers who want to know more about my notion of positivism may consult my critical essays (Fabian 1991b) and the book by Leszek Kolakowski *Philosophy of Science That Uses Ethnographic Methods* (1991).

11. As far as I recall, the suggestion came from Philippe Marechal, a historian at the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, who was then working on his thorough study of the Belgian anti-Arab campaign (1992).

12. Just as this manuscript went to press I received from Beatrix Heintze a copy of her work on German explorers in Angola (1999a); a condensed version of it appeared in English just before my study went to the printer (1999b). Apart as well as others outside the period of my study. As may be expected, Heintze's much wider corpus of sources (which, unlike mine, is not limited to published travelogues) and our different theoretical interests and polemical temperaments lead us to different readings and evaluations of some of the protagonists and their work. It was encouraging to see that a scholar for whom I have the greatest respect has found a similar, in many ways complementary, undertaking worthwhile.

13. The East Central African Expedition was organized and initially led by Keith Johnston, a geographer and cartographer trained in Britain and Germany who had field experience in Paraguay. He soon became seriously ill and died on June 28, 1879. Thomson called him one of the "geographical martyrs who have attempted to break through the barriers of disease and barbarism which make the interior almost impenetrable" (*Expedition*, 1881, 149).

14. I made a similar choice in my *Language and Colonial Power*, as I explain there (*Language* and *Colonial Power*).

15. See *Exploration* 1 (1876): 1, 4.

16. On the foundation of the Afrikanische Gesellschaft in Deutschland and its prehistory, see MAGD, no. 1 (1878): 1-3 and 18-21; on its dissolution, MAGD 5, no. 3 (1880): 133.

17. The literature on Leopold II and the Congo Free State is vast. For a fairly recent biography of the king in English, see Emerson 1979. Scores of works were published around 1885, when several international meetings commemorated the centennial of the Berlin Conference and of Leopold's colony. Pakenham 1991 is a voluminous yet readable account of the African activities of the imperial powers and their agents, detailing the major campaigns and conquests from 1876-1912 that constituted "the scramble for Africa." But none of the sources I will be using figure in Pakenham's account. The most recent scholarly treatment of the period is Wesseling 1996.

18. See the autobiography of the great trader and traveler Tipo Tip (Hamed bin Mohammed el Murjbi), who met many of our protagonists. The most richly documented edition and translation of this document is Bontinck and Janssen 1974 (in French), which includes a history of the text.

19. I should point out that the term Arab, as used in our sources, sometimes refers to people who either came from or traced their origins to regions such as Oman and Muscat and who continued to speak Arabic in Africa. Most often, however, the term designates persons of mixed Arab and African descent who spoke Swahili, the linguistic medium of a distinctive east coast culture and, in its vehicular varieties (as trade or work idioms) from the coast to the upper Congo, a means of communication. I follow the sources in using Arab whenever the meaning is clear from the context; otherwise I specify Arab-Swahili or simply Swahili.

20. See H七星ey 1982, as well as Rotberg 1970b, a collection of historical essays on the major figures of that period.

21. The United States played an important role in the emergence of the Congo Free State, something often overlooked, though well documented in Bontinck 1986.

22. The United States played an important role in the emergence of the Congo Free State, something often overlooked, though well documented in Bontinck 1986.

23. See Bastian 1874-75, MAGD, and MAGD, no. 1 (1898): 18.

24. I thank Beatrix Heintze for bringing Essner's book to my attention.

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1. A list of regulations were eventually authored by some of our protagonists. Remarkable examples are the appendices to Becker's work (1887, 1457-90; 1898-99); Sociètè d'études coloniales 1896; and Wissmann 1893. We will address this literature in chapter 8.

2. Published in an appendix to vol. 1 (1874-75), *Notes and Queries*.

3. These are appellations in Swahili that were used mostly in expeditions departing from the east coast. But Zanzibaris were also employed in operations starting from the lower Congo. Caravans departing from the Portuguese Loango coast seem to have been somewhat less clearly structured, to judge from descriptions in the sources.

4. It took an exceptionally open-minded person such as Willy Wolff to appreciate Kornelius's intellect and wisdom. He devotes an entire chapter to the latter's views on European education *Hamed bin Mohammed el Murjbi*, who met many of our protagonists. The most richly documented edition and translation of this document is Bontinck and Janssen 1974 (in French), which includes a history of the text.

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