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Behind the Scenes of Research

Introduction

The history of the Loango coast between Gabon and Cabinda in equatorial Africa is blessed with many firsthand accounts spanning the last five centuries; these include observers such as Andrew Battell and Duarte Lopez who lived for long periods in Loango and neighboring regions in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Purchas 1617; Lopes, Pigafetta, and Hutchinson 1881). Their accounts come at the beginning of more than four centuries of interaction with the West – interactions that ranged from the depredations of the slave trade to the political disenfranchisement and humiliation of colonial conquest. The cultural lens of each observer colored and prejudiced their accounts, but their observations are particularly important because they were informed by many years of residence in what would become the Republic of Congo. With cautious reading, they contain a wealth of information about the countryside, its peoples, and their cultural beliefs and transformations. Records gleaned from Catholic missionary accounts in the middle of the eighteenth century illuminate the changes that took place between the period of initial contact and the height of the slave trade (Proyart 1814; Nsondé 1995). Later, Richard Dennett (1887, 1898, 1968) and Eduard Pechuël-Loesche (1907) provide additional accounts for the nineteenth century. Dennett, in particular, was a long-term observer and trader who used his local knowledge of the Vili language and customs to provide detailed and sometimes acerbic descriptions of Fioté (Vili) beliefs and customs at the beginning of the colonial era.

But until the archaeological research presented here was carried out, there was little information about the region or its peoples before their first encounters with Europeans. For the earlier periods, indigenous responses to the slave and commodity trade along the coast had to be largely deciphered indirectly from the accounts of outsiders. Some sense of local responses can be gleaned, however, from archaeological readings of the earthenware containers, salt-glazed stoneware, glass rum, wine, and gin bottles, locally made clay tobacco pipes, tombstones, and other artifacts found on the coastal plain (Denbow 1990, 1999). Archaeological evidence can expand, supplement, and in some cases provide a corrective or help nuance the accounts of foreign traders, missionaries, and adventurers. But the archaeological excavations reported here span a much

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longer period – more than 3,000 years – to expose the deeper roots from which later societies and kingdoms such as Loango grew. These data are presented here in detail for the first time.

In places such as the Congo, where archaeological research is so new that its logistical framework and interpretive understandings are still emerging, fluidity in knowledge forms often produces unexpected twists and turns as multiple and cross-cultural perspectives intertwine over the course of day-to-day interaction between archaeologists and their local counterparts. To enrich what otherwise would be a linear précis of excavations and artifacts, this book attempts to illuminate and personalize the archaeological process by foregrounding in some sections the dialogues, interactions, and experiences of archaeologists, family members, and local Congolese as the project unfolded. By setting the scientific work in its broader context, it is hoped that what will emerge is a more multifaceted understanding of the ways in which people interact with their history and communicate their knowledge and attitudes toward life (Geertz 1973: 89).

The book is divided into two sections: the first four chapters establish the logistical, cultural, and environmental setting in which the research took place; the next three chapters present the detailed results of archaeological excavations at fifteen sites chronicled by forty radiocarbon dates and a new ceramic typology. This work provides a first glimpse into 3,300 years of prehistoric settlement in this hitherto unexplored region of equatorial Africa. Chapter 8 explores the relationship of this work to archaeological and linguistic knowledge across the region from Angola to the northern edge of the Kalahari Desert and the Okavango Delta. The final chapter provides a brief summary of the information presented along with a call for better protection for Africa's rapidly vanishing archaeological heritage.

Arrivals

One perhaps could have no better introduction to the Loango coast than to arrive by sea, following a route used by many earlier generations of slavers, explorers, and adventurers. Richard Burton was one of these. Sailing along a route from Fernando Po that paralleled the Gabon coast southward across the Equator to Pointe Indienne in 1863,¹ he caught his first glimpse of Loango Bay and wrote,

The country looks high and bold after the desperate flatness of the Bights [of Benin], and we note with pleasure that we have left behind us the “impervious luxuriance of vegetation which crowns the lowlands, covers the sides of the rises, and caps their summits.” During the rains after October the grass, now showing yellow stubble upon the ruddy, rusty plain, becomes a cane fence, ten to twelve feet tall; but instead of matted, felted jungle, knitted together by creepers of cable size, we have scattered clumps of dark, lofty, and broad-topped trees. A nearer view shows great cliffs, weather-worked into ravines and basins, ribs and ridges, towers and pinnacles. Above them is a joyful open land ... pitted with the crater-like sinks locally called “holes,” so frequent in the Gaboon country. Loango is a “pool harbour” ... a spit of shingle, whose bay, north-east and south-west, forms an inner lagoon, bounded landwards by conspicuous and weather-tarnished red cliffs. This “lingual” rests upon a base of terra firma whose westernmost projection is Indian Point. From the latter runs northwards the “infamous” Indian Bar ... a reef some three miles long, which the waves assault with prodigious fury; a terror to slavers, especially in our autumn, when the squalls and storms begin. The light sandy soil of the mainland rests upon compact clay, and malaria rises only where the little drains, which should feed the lagoon, evaporate in swamps. Here and there are clumps of tall cocoas, a copot, pullom or wild cotton-tree, and a neat village upon prairie land, where stone is as rare as on the Pampas.... Guided by a hut upon the beach

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fronting French Factory and under lee of the breakers off Indian Bar, I landed near a tree-motte, in a covelet smoothed by a succession of sandpits. (Burton 1876, vol. 2: 3–5)

My own entry in November 1987, like that of most modern travelers, was less picturesque. An hour's flight from Brazzaville, the capital city, in a threadbare Air Congo jet deposited me on the tarmac fronting a two-story corrugated iron shed on which, in faded red lettering, was inscribed "Agostinho Neto Aéroport, Pointe Noire." The airstrip, though patched and rough, was serviceable, and I noted as we landed that the local women were clearing new manioc gardens right up to the edge of the crumbling tarmac. Having landed in what was then the People's Republic of the Congo, ruled by the oldest Marxist-Leninist government in Africa, I quickly learned what that meant in practical terms: those with money or connections could be whisked quickly through to the "Salon d'Honneur" to await their luggage; others less fortunate were left to haggle with a line of eager customs and immigration agents primed to extract fees for the importation of goods such as my laptop computer. On my first visit I was lucky enough to be among the former group. My trip had been arranged by Conoco Oil Company in Houston, which had asked me to examine an archaeological locality discovered by some of their personnel in an area they were planning to bid on for an oil lease from the Congolese government. One of Conoco's "facilitators" met me at the plane and quickly escorted me through the building and upstairs to await my luggage. There I was pleasantly surprised to find that the entire upper story of the sweltering building was taken up with a dimly lit bar cooled by several slowly turning ceiling fans. Refreshments were being served to those waiting to depart, those thankful for having arrived successfully through the bureaucratic gauntlet below, and those simply in need of a drink and a cigarette.

A few years later I would be shockingly reminded of the manioc gardens on the side of the airstrip when a munitions dump left behind by departing Cuban soldiers exploded in a fearful conflagration. The port at Pointe Noire had long been used by the Cuban army to land munitions and supplies for their efforts in support of the Angolan government's side in the civil war in Cabinda. Over the years they had also established a firing range and a "rest farm" for recuperating soldiers in the countryside outside Pointe Noire (Figure 1.1, top). It was not far from the archaeological site of Mvindou, where I would later excavate. The push toward multiparty democracies that spread across Africa in the 1990s following the unraveling of the Soviet Union precipitated a change in government in the Congo in 1991. As a result, the Cubans were asked to leave. They did so the following year, leaving behind two decades' worth of munitions and missiles stacked like firewood at the far end of the airstrip. When the women arrived at the end of the dry season the following year to burn off their now-withered gardens in preparation for a new season, they did not realize that with the Cuban soldiers gone, no one had kept the munitions dump clear of vegetation. Around two in the afternoon, as their fires reached the end of the airstrip, the munitions ignited. I was sitting at a sidewalk café in Pointe Noire 8 kilometers away when massive explosions began, followed by missiles whistling high into the air. Those of us nursing our after-lunch coffees, mostly expatriates, shot uneasy glances at one another.

"A coup d'état?" one asked.

"The explosions are all coming from the direction of the airport."

Heavy concussions shook the ground around us and shattered the store windows. They continued far into the night, littering the airstrip with shrapnel and disrupting air traffic for days. I later learned that many children, fearing the worst, had fled their homes to seek safety in the surrounding forest. Some did not return to their worried families for days.²

That same year the vivid, red oil paintings of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Che Guevara that had graced the dusty parade ground in front of the district offices in Madingo-Kayes, a small village 70 kilometers north of Pointe Noire, were removed (Figure 1.1, bottom). The red flag of

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Figure 1.1. **(top)** A view of the Cuban “farm” and firing range outside Pointe Noire where soldiers fighting in the civil war in Angola were sent for rest and recovery. Several archaeological sites were found near the buildings and firing range. Scattered signboards in Spanish such as this one contained inspirational quotations, including this one from Che Guevara urging “Nos forjaremos en la acción cotidiana creando un hombre Nuevo con una nueva técnica” or, roughly, “Through our daily actions we will forge ourselves into new men with new skills.” The Cubans abandoned the camp when they were asked to leave Angola as part of the general settlement of the Angolan Civil War; **(bottom)** The parade ground in Madingo-Kayes as it appeared in 1988 with large oil paintings of Marx, Lenin, and Guevara flanking the red flag of the People’s Republic of the Congo.

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the Marxist regime, with its gold star and crossed hammer and hoe flanked by green fronds, was replaced with a new one bearing the pan-African colors of green, gold, and red. It appeared to symbolize new hopes for a fledgling democracy.

Our archaeological team first heard of the change in government while surveying an area 40 kilometers northeast of Pointe Noire where the coastal savanna surrenders to tropical forest on the mist-shrouded flanks of the Mayombe Mountains. There had been a lot of talk about political change, but everything seemed confused and intangible. Then, as we were walking across the savanna looking for artifacts, Romain Mougani, one of the younger Congolese workers who was never without his portable radio with its twisted-piece-of-wire antenna, called out in French, “Hey, everyone, come here and listen.”

We gathered around the radio as it was announced that the Congo would no longer be a Marxist republic. A look of utter astonishment spread over the face of Casimir Kissiboula, an older worker in his forties and a staunch Catholic.

“I don’t understand. How can they just abandon this philosophy?” he asked. “I have been taught most of my life how important Marxism is and how we must constantly struggle to build a new and better society. And now they just throw it away like that?” he said, snapping his fingers. “Like it was nothing?”

His comments were all the more poignant because he had faced his own personal difficulties because of the practice of his religion, which, while not forbidden, was not looked on with favor by the political elite or “Bouton Rouge” as they were called after the circular red badge they wore in their lapels.

The following year it was my turn to be surprised as I counted the number of small village churches that had sprung up like flowers along the drive from Pointe Noire to Madingo-Kayes. Most were simple clearings in the forest where bamboo crosses were set up facing a few rows of roughly hewn log benches. Woven walls of split bamboo sometimes surrounded the open-air chapels. Although perhaps coincidental, their appearance suggested that new spiritual needs were being addressed – or that older ones, once suppressed, were now finding expression.

Landscapes and Constructed Meanings

A few times during the course of the archaeological reconnaissance, sacred groves and springs were pointed out to me, but most of the time my Congolese crew and I passed by or through them unaware of their existence. During my first visit in 1987, I was taken to one such spring deep in the gallery forest that shaded the bottom of Diosso Gorge. To get to the spring, I had to descend the sheer sand face of the gorge by inserting my feet, one below the other, into small, crumbling toeholds cut into the smooth wall of the cliff. About 10 meters down, the primitive stairway ended in a faint trail that wound for 500 meters through the jungle to a small spring. Little distinguished it from other locations, and I would not have known of its ritual significance had I not been told. A few fragments of broken porcelain and glass and a few scraps of tattered cloth were the only indications that anyone visited this quiet glade. On another occasion, while surveying 40 kilometres northwest of Madingo-Kayes, we came upon a small jungle clearing. Inside, a “bed” of earth had been raised 15 centimeters above ground level and surrounded by a low wall of cut saplings; little else suggested that this space had spiritual meaning. In other spots, tombstones on the deserted savanna marked the locations of now-vanished villages. Depictions of the sun, moon, stars, and other figures molded on them evoked the spiritual meanings with which they once had been imbued, although these were now only dimly understood (Dennett 1968; Denbow 1999).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Loango terrain was replete with such sacred places and meanings. R. E. Dennett, an English trader and resident of Loango for more

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than two decades, was fortunate enough to be led through the countryside by guides more spiritually informed than mine. They pointed out to him more than 100 sacred groves, trees, and springs that configured a cultural landscape redolent with cosmologic imagery:

As we passed through the village of Zulu, we cast a last look at the sea and the pretty Bay of Luango, with its lighthouse at Point Indienne. Just beyond the point, on the way to Black Point [present-day Pointe Noire], one can see the wood that contains the sacred grove of Nymina; and nearer to Luango may be noticed the tall mangrove trees that mark the grove sacred to Lungululubu. We next crossed the Xibanda [Tchibanda]³ valley, and came to a place where once a town stood, called Ximpuku. Looking north from this place we noted upon the crest of the opposite hill the grove sacred to Mpuku Nyambi, while to the south, and not far from our standpoint, a minor grove, spoken of as the offspring of Mpuku Nyambi, topped the hill. This grove is called Xilu Xinkukuba, and is near the linguist Juan's town. Then 14 or 15 miles south, behind Black Point, near to the River Ximani and the town of Nvuxi, stands the grove of Xivuma, and as many miles north, at Xissanga upon the sea coast, is situated the grove sacred to the double personages Nxiluka and Xikanga; while far away to the north, on the ruddy cliffs behind Konkwati, 60 miles from here, is the grove called Xinjili. (Dennett 1968: 9)

Today, other objects continue to inscribe cultural meaning onto local places, things, and landscapes. On the crest of the hill that overlooks Loango Bay to the south and the archaeological site of Tchissanga (Dennett's Xissanga) to the north, an oil company had erected a now-rusting iron tower to transmit radio signals from its workers in the field to its headquarters in Pointe Noire. When I passed the tower for the first time, I was surprised to see next to it an unusual "fetish" that consisted of a pole topped by a wooden platform holding a piece of broken mirror and several water-worn, white quartzite cobbles. Affixed to a wooden plaque on the side of the pole was a picture of a Mercedes-Benz, neatly torn from a magazine. Nearby, the whitewashed lid of a paint can dangled from a piece of electrical cable attached with a strip of red cloth to another pole. Two paint-spattered gloves stuck onto a bush at its base completed the contraption (Figure 1.2, top). My first thought was that the fetish had been constructed to protest the seeming omnipotence of multinational corporations and their minions who rarely stopped to visit with local people as they sped through the area in their air-conditioned 4×4s. That thought was quickly replaced by another: perhaps this fetish had been built to harness in some way the power of these foreign companies, turning it to local use. It was not until a year later that I accidentally stumbled on the fetish's origin and purpose.

Our archaeological camp, a rough three-room wooden shed with a wide veranda, had been built for us on the beach below Tchissanga by Conoco in 1988. Fishermen from a village on the heights above beached their dugouts nearby. The fishermen sometimes remained on the ocean for several days at a time, "camping out" in their small canoes and warding off the cold by huddling over wood fires built over a bed of earth in the bottom of their vessels. In the evenings, we would often see their fires reflecting off the low clouds far out to sea. Over the course of our project, I came to know many of them, including one roguish old man named Bernard who was particularly talkative and friendly. The Congolese crew quickly nicknamed him "Dracula" behind his back because of his blackened and broken set of sawlike front teeth.

One afternoon while visiting with Bernard as he hammered yet another tin patch onto the side of his weather-beaten canoe (Figure 1.2, bottom), I brought up the topic of the fetish near the radio tower.

"I wonder who built that?" I asked idly.

"Why, I did," he said with some pride. "The oil company pays me to look after the tower and make sure no one vandalizes it. I can't be there all the time, so I built the fetish to keep vandals away. I haven't had any problems."

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Figure 1.2. **(top)** Bernard’s fetish on the hilltop overlooking Tchissanga as it appeared in 1987; **(bottom)** Bernard patching his fishing canoe on the beach just north of our archaeological camp, which can be seen in the background.

The same hilltop with the radio tower and Bernard’s fetish was also the site of a monument of historical, if not ritual, significance. Brazzaville, in the present Republic of Congo, had been the symbolic capital of Free France between 1940 and 1943. Fears of a German attack had led to the posting of a small garrison of soldiers on the tower hill as lookouts because it had an excellent view over Loango Bay. I never learned who the soldiers were; they were likely local

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villagers recruited into the French army. In 1943, Central and West Africans made up more than half of the Free French army (Shillington 1995: 362–372). Their stay must have been memorable because after the war they constructed a small cement monument roughly inscribed with the words “Poste de Surveillance, Armée Française, Guerre 39–46” to mark their tour of duty on the lonely hilltop.

Other encounters with spiritually charged objects during the archaeological reconnaissance reinforced a feeling that ancient values and beliefs continued to inform people’s interaction with their landscape. Small bundles of traditional medicines in bowls tied up with cloth, for instance, were sometimes found along footpaths and crossroads. These were meant to prevent the passage of people with evil intentions; other objects, often with iron nails hammered into them, were hung over doorways (including the entrance to the Maloango Museum in Diosso) to protect the property. Drawing from the memoirs of Bernardino Ungaro, Pierre Belgarde, and Castellet de Clais, who established a short-lived mission station at Kibota in Loango in 1766, Proyart, an abbé in France, provides an insight into the antiquity of such practices, remarking that in the eighteenth century, “the most determined robber dares not cross the threshold, when he sees it defended by these mysterious signs” (Proyart 1814: 595). Andrew Battell, an English adventurer and small-time trader who lived in Loango between 1607 and 1610, reports similar uses of traditional medicines at the beginning of the seventeenth century:

They use to set in their fields, and places where Corne or Fruites grow, a Basket with Goats-hornes, Parrats feathers, and other trash: This is the Mokisso’s [Mokissi] ensigne, or token that it is commended to his custodie; and therefore the people very much addicted to theft, dare not meddle, or take any thing. (Battell in Purchas 1617: 874–875)

Different types of signs were found inscribed or painted onto late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century tombstones during the archaeological reconnaissance. Dennett (1968: 75) found these and other symbols sewn onto ritual clothing in ways that could be syntactically “read” by their makers. The meanings he records complement the deeply rooted cosmological interpretations of similar symbols found in works such as Robert Farris Thompson and J. Cornet’s *The Four Moments of the Sun* and the symbolism of iron smelting described in Eugenia Herbert’s *Iron, Gender and Power*. They also resonate more widely with Kongo religious beliefs as explained in André Fu-Kiau’s *Le Mukongo et le monde qui l’entourait*, Wyatt MacGaffey’s *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, and Karl Laman’s four-volume ethnography, *The Kongo*.

The tombstone designs also symbolized the political authority of the last MaLoango or King (Denbow 1999). One, for instance, included a hand with seven stars (Figure 1.3). As with most symbols, such ideograms have multiple layers of meaning embedded in them. The word for “palm of the hand,” *kànda*, for instance, is a pun for matrilineal clan or *kanda* (neutral tone) according to Nsondé (1995: 102). Joseph Kimfoko-Maddungou (n.d.: 4), curator of a small museum at the last MaLoango’s house near Diosso, provides additional meanings for the palm and star ideogram:

The king is represented by the palm with seven stars and the arms that direct or guide it include the seven clans of Nkongo. These stars also represent, symbolically, the face of the king: two stars standing for his eyes so that he may oversee his territory, two stars representing his ears so that he may hear the sorrows and desires of his people, two stars representing the king’s nostrils so that he may “smell out” or remain sensitive to the troubles of his people, and, finally, one star that stands for the mouth of the king through which he renders justice. It is his voice alone that can be heard throughout the kingdom (Kimfoko-Maddungou n.d.: 4, author’s translation from French).

According to Dennett (1968), the stars also signify a cultural landscape – the seven traditional districts or provinces ruled over by Loango kings: (1) Samanu, found along the Luango Luici

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Figure 1.3. Early twentieth-century tombstone in Loango with heart, hand, stars, and key motifs that symbolize concepts of the soul, ancestors, and clan.

River south of Pointe Noire near the present Cabinda border; (2) Tchibanga, the northern province which was divided into two sections by the Kouilou River – a region where pretenders to the throne were “never found wanting”; (3) Loanjili, the province that connects the first two provinces, with the exception of an area called Buali fronting Loango Bay; (4) Buali, the strip of land along the coast of Loanjili that connected the traditional capital with the beach near Pointe Indienne where the kings of Loango traditionally lived and where the tomb of the last MaLoango is located (Figure 1.4); (5) Tchikamba, the province directly inland from Buali/Loanjili. It rises toward the forested Mayombe Mountains in the east; (6) Nkonde, another inland province of scattered savannas and gallery forests, lies southeast of Buali and Tchikamba and is the place where the sisters of the MaLoango traditionally resided. The king’s successor was chosen from among their sons; and (7) Mbuku, a region northeast of Tchikamba where the Mambuku or guardian of the eastern gateway to the Kingdom resided (Figure 1.5). These region names were still in use during the archaeological reconnaissance.

Gateways composed of two poles supporting a fringe of palm fronds protected the northern, southern, and eastern entrances to the kingdom in the late 19th century (Dennett 1968: 90). These were identical in design to the larger example that straddles the entranceway to the tomb of Moe Poaty III, the last MaLoango. Such structures still occasionally evoke cosmological forces. One afternoon while traveling along a jungle trail leading from one savanna to another, for instance, we came upon one of these gateways – a small one built over the walkway leading to a small thatched house. As we approached, a man I took to be the owner was standing outside. When I stopped and asked him why he had built it, his face erupted in a wide smile.

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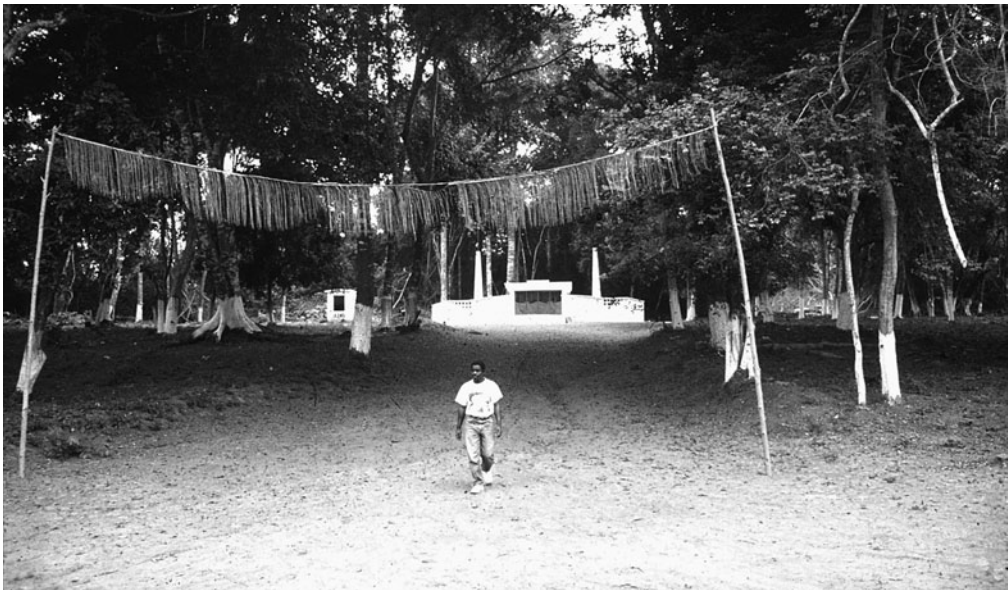


Figure 1.4. Photo of the grave of the last MaLoango or King near Diosso. The gateway of palm fronds under which Romain is walking, called *mabili* in the Vili language, is a type of charm. In the nineteenth century, a similar gateway guarded the eastern entrance to the Kingdom of Loango.

“I am a very lucky man, the father of twins. This is built to honor them,” he said. Although this may seem confusing, unusual events or rare births, such as that of twins or albino children, are thought to be the result of supernatural forces that mark out such individuals as having a special relationship with the supernatural. Albinos, for instance, were believed by the ancient inhabitants of Loango to have spiritual powers far greater than those of ordinary people. As a result, they were often appointed by the MaLoango as advisors or diviners within the kingdom (Battell in Purchase 1617: 875). Proyard (1814: 596) adds that

[t]his error of nature ... far from being a disgrace to those on whom it falls, conciliates respect and veneration; ... placed above the *ganga* [diviner], they are regarded as extraordinary men and quite divine; so much so, that the missionaries saw one whose hairs were sold as reliques, which, it was said, had the virtue of preserving the bearer from all kinds of accidents.

The gateway to this man’s house clearly resonated on many levels with beliefs and traditions that continue to inform people’s perspectives of their past and present lives.

The Mayombe Mountains: Guardian of the Eastern Gateway to Loango

Between 1925 and 1932, more than 11,000 lives were lost constructing the rail line through the Mayombe Mountains from Pointe Noire (Andriamirado 1984). And the single-track route through the jungle is still treacherous: a collision between a passenger and a freight train in September 1991 killed more than 100 people; another collision in 2001 killed at least 50 passengers. In July 2010, a derailment due to excessive speed on a curve took 176 lives when the train plunged into a deep ravine.⁴

The Pointe Noire-Brazzaville rail line was built by the French to compete with the Matadi-Kinshasa line built over two decades earlier by King Leopold II of Belgium. A new port at Pointe