

WEALTH IN PEOPLE AS WEALTH IN KNOWLEDGE:
ACCUMULATION AND COMPOSITION IN
EQUATORIAL AFRICA*

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FOR Equatorial Africa, the disparity between the richness and originality of empirical studies and the spareness of the anthropological models is so great that the entire region figures relatively little in comparative studies, even within Africa. Concepts developed there, such as the 'lineage mode of production' and 'wealth-in-people', were immediately applicable elsewhere and 'migrated' in ways that severed their connection to the Equatorial region.¹ The lineage mode was explicitly intended for general rather than regional use, as a successor to the primitive communist mode in the neo-Marxist intellectual project. And in non-Marxist contexts the name itself provided a bridge to the foundational scholarship on African societies more broadly, which had identified lineages and gender/generational inequality as structural principles. Like the lineage mode, wealth-in-people is now applied

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¹ The lineage mode of production was proposed by P-P. Rey, *Colonialisme, néo-colonialisme et transition au capitalisme: exemple de la Comilog au Congo Brazzaville* (Paris, 1971), on the basis of Congo ethnography. By the late 1970s it was being used to analyze groups as different from the Punu as Southern African pastoralists, e.g. Jeff Guy, 'Ecological factors in the rise of Shaka and the Zulu kingdom', in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), 102–19. The concept of wealth-in-people (with or without hyphens) seems to have been first used by S. Miers and I. Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977). It was applied to the Kpelle by C. Bledsoe, *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society* (Stanford, 1980), and brought back again to Equatorial Africa in the works of J. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, 1988), and J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990). It has recently been used by M. Vaughan and H. Moore, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990* (Portsmouth NH, 1994), with respect to the Bemba.

both to the Equatorial region and elsewhere in Africa. It offers a useful descriptive term for the well-appreciated fact that interpersonal dependents of all kinds – wives, children, clients and slaves – were valued, sought and paid for at considerable expense in material terms in pre-colonial Africa. In some places they were the pinnacle, and even the unit of measurement, of ultimate value.²

This process whereby attributes of Equatorial Africa become metonymic of Africa-in-general applies to a broader and more popular set of cultural productions than our academic concepts of the lineage mode and wealth-in-people. Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* is discussed as African philosophy; Fang statuary comes to stand for 'primitivism' in general; Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is read and debated as an icon of modernist narrative about race and identity; and the forest remains Europe's image of Africa. Whether the theoretical marginality of the Equatorial region is due to Western metaphorical constructions of Africa, to the sheer difficulty of synthesizing the variety of the Equatorial ethnography, or to the divide between French and English colonies and literatures, is a topic we can raise rather than resolve here. But there is one important result: regional specificities and complexities of social and cultural history are lost to comparative historical study.

The extraordinary originality of Equatorial societies, however, is still affirmed within the regional literature. Vansina³ has persuasively argued and illustrated the plausibility of a single 'tradition' for the entire region. But when Equatorial scholars focus on the specificities they tend to leave the issue of models aside.⁴ In fact, beyond documenting in detail 'the stubbornness with which (the tradition) held to its own concepts, values, institutions, and tools', Vansina draws on the ideas behind the generalized wealth-in-people model to summarize these dynamics over time: 'after centuries of trading, goods still retained their value as items for use rather than for exchange. Wherever possible, wealth in goods was still converted into followers'.⁵ Possibly a more specific theory of Equatorial Africa's originalities is not possible or even desirable; certainly Vansina is discouraging: 'Shortcuts to comparative anthropology merely produce shoddy results'.⁶ But the gap between the intricacy of description and the 'African-in-general' nature of the models cannot help but remain a challenge.

This paper is devoted to revisiting the problem. The richness of the published work over the past 15 years or so, including Vansina's magisterial synthesis, enables us to re-examine both originality and generalizable themes

² P. Bohannan's seminal article on spheres of exchange among the Tiv, 'Some principles of exchange and investment among the Tiv', *American Anthropologist*, LVII (1955), 60–70, places women at the top of the hierarchy of value. In his definitive work on the Bene of Southern Cameroon, Laburthe-Tolra begins his chapter on the economy with an indigenous proverb: 'If you hear wealth it means people'; P. Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba* (Paris, 1977), 495.

³ Vansina, *Paths*.

⁴ These thoughts are largely stimulated by Vansina's synthesis of the Equatorial history and ethnography, which both highlights the issues and also provides us – in his unification of the entire area as a single 'tradition' – with a rationale and excuse for using varied cases for inspiration without immediately falling into an inextricable tangle of ethnographic and historical localism. His own boldness in suggesting that there are common themes amongst the variations and innovations of Equatorial social history, of which wealth-in-people is one, gives the rest of us a window of opportunity for the kinds of speculation we pursue here.

⁵ *Ibid.* 251.

⁶ *Ibid.* 263.

in the Equatorial literature. We conclude that the concept of wealth-in-people can apply to Equatorial Africa in a way that is analytically different from its now-classic senses. The ethnography is unambiguous and unanimous that knowledge was particularly highly valued and complexly organized in Equatorial societies. Our analysis suggests that the comparative social organization of knowledge in African societies may be as important to understand and theorize for historical purposes as the social organization of kinship and material life. The logic of our argument is summarized briefly as an introduction to the empirical analysis.

As we discuss in more detail below, the reason that Equatorial knowledge has been particularly difficult to fit into a Western analytical vocabulary is that it was not diffuse, just 'culture', and therefore to be studied with the techniques of cultural analysis. Neither was it specialist, in the sense of a closed esoteric system with its classifications, propositions and derivations that was controlled and monopolized by a small cadre of experts or a secret society hierarchy, and therefore to be studied as philosophy or doctrine. Collectively, knowledge was conceptualized as an open repertoire and an unbounded vista; then *within* collectivities the vista was divided up and quite widely distributed on the basis of personal capacity. Adepts were many and varied, each pushing up against the outside limits of their own frontier of the known world, inventing new ways of configuring, storing and using what must have been an ever shifting spectrum of possibility.

There seems to be no obvious explanation for this pattern. Possibly for areas where 'the complexity of habitats is immense'⁷ and people were prepared to move around in response to trade and regional politics, the knowledge repertoire was simply too great for centralized pooling under political control. Storing it all in a few chosen minds might breach the bounds of human mental capacity, and in any case controlling people was always difficult. They could move away. But this pragmatic explanation hardly captures the pervasiveness of diversity in these cultures. Devotion to knowledge went far beyond the basic requisites for making a living, even in a complex environment. Vansina writes: 'local communities *knew much more* about their local habitats than they needed to know for utilitarian purposes', 'such scientific knowledge *for knowledge's sake* was an essential ingredient...'⁸ of social life. These relatively small, dispersed and mobile populations were also expert in the arts, music, dance, rhetoric and the spiritual life as well as hunting, gathering, fishing, cultivation, raffia-weaving, wood-carving and metallurgy.

We have two sources for an empirical exploration of the logic of wealth-in-people as wealth-in-knowledge. The first compensates for the lack of detailed ethnographic or historical sources on political mobilization. The focus on structures in the study of pre-colonial Africa was not just an aspect of Western intellectual history but also a function of the colonial situation: structures were still in evidence when early descriptions were made, but political mobilization on the whole was not.⁹ For peoples whose social

⁷ *Ibid.* 257.

⁸ *Ibid.* 89, 255, emphasis added.

⁹ Evans-Pritchard, for example, never saw a leopard-skin chief mediation, nor major warfare, although both of these figure centrally in his path-breaking study of the Nuer political system. Of the leopard-skin chief he emphasised, 'I repeat that I have not seen this method employed ...'; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes*

structures have always been described in terms of their fluidity, negotiability and even anarchy, we sorely miss a strong record on political action under autonomous conditions. To illustrate political mobilization in full detail, then, in Part 1 we analyze a published epic from the Bulu-Beti-Fang group¹⁰ that recounts a great exploit in exquisite detail.

Part 2 reviews a long-term contradiction that has existed between the theoretical models and the empirical sources. Theoretical insistence on the primacy of kinship in segmentary societies, which originates ultimately in evolutionary theory, has proved an effective barrier to consideration of important parts of the ethnographic record. The lineage mode and wealth-in-people both incorporate this century-old proposition by including kinship and marriage as critical components of accumulative and 'big man' strategies. We do not argue that this is mistaken, but rather that it leaves dramatically under-appreciated and under-theorized an aspect of social life of great substantive importance. In order to focus on knowledge it needs to be lifted out of the shadow that the kin/demographic matrix places it in.

Part 3 reviews the ethnographic sources on Equatorial knowledge as a resource before and after political mobilization: the ordinary and mundane conditions of its production, management and storage. Groups not only captured knowledge from outside and mobilized it for action but also created, attracted and cultivated new qualities in their members, invented new ways of condensing and storing knowledge, and showed great receptivity to novelty brought in through trade.¹¹ As Fernandez writes, there was a 'fundamental distinction... between "knowledgeable people" (*Beyeme Mam*), "those who know things", and the "simple and ignorant people" (*Bidime Mam*). This distinction underlies a good bit of Fang thought on the nature of social relations...'.¹² We address this and other sources for rethinking the underlying conditions for wealth-in-people as wealth-in-knowledge in Part 3.

The conclusion draws out some historical implications from what is basically a logical and inferential paper. The study of growth in Equatorial

of *Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford, 1940), 164. His detailed descriptions of groups mobilized for warfare and feuding come entirely from oral history and not from ethnography.

¹⁰ There is always a problem in designating the 'ethnicity' of the groups that constitute a contiguous cluster in Southern Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea and that speak mutually intelligible dialects of the same language. Each sub-group in a ramifying segmentation has its own marked characteristics. The famous Fang reliquaries, for example, were not made outside a particular region, and styles of performance were said to have specific origins. So, for accuracy's sake, references to groups from here onwards will refer to the relevant sub-groups. The entire cluster is part of the 'Equatorial Tradition' as defined by Vansina, *Paths*.

¹¹ See J. I. Guyer, 'Wealth in people and self-realization in Equatorial Africa', *Man*, (n.s.) xxviii (1993), 243-65. I. Kopytoff's model of the 'African frontier', in Kopytoff (ed.), *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington, 1987), is influential here but overstates the conservatism of new community formation to a fairly extreme degree. Not only do some of the papers in the collection suggest social innovation, but by holding the history of material life constant he fails to incorporate the extremely rapid growth in knowledge, of cultigens and monies in particular.

¹² J. W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton, 1982), 68.

Africa in the pre-colonial period might be seen as, in part, a social history of expanding knowledge, and the history of the colonial era as one of loss, denial and partial reconstitution. The fact that much of this must remain inaccessible should not deter us from creating the space to envisage it.

PART I: THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF WEALTH-IN-PEOPLE:
MONEBLUM (THE BLUE MAN), BY DANIEL OSOMO

Narrative provides evidence for how a social world is constituted and animated for those who are its audience. To hold attention it must create a recognizable and meaningful world, even while it invokes extraordinary manifestations. The longer and more complex the narrative surely the more challenging the task. Thus an epic can perhaps be taken to represent, in heightened intensity, dynamics that are thoroughly familiar in life. The characters, their relationships to one another and the causative connections in the story-line all convey a meaningful, even if outrageously exaggerated and embellished, version of social reality. Analysis of one such complete narrative can give us something that the historical ethnography cannot, namely culturally valid descriptions of multiple moments of political mobilization. When we look at these in *Moneblum*, we argue, processes of personal differentiation (the singularity of adepts) and social composition come through consistently, and their relationship to status authority, to control of forces-in-things ('magic') and to wealth-in-things can be clarified.

The most elaborate oral performances of the Beti-Bulu-Fang were accompanied by music played on a stringed instrument, the *mvét*. The *mvét* is of Ntumu origin; performers from the neighboring sub-groups such as Fang and Bulu travelled there to be initiated into the art. More distant sub-groups learned at a distance, from their intervening neighbors. It is to the Ntumu region that scholars turn for practitioners of the classic form of the art.

Moneblum (The Blue Man) was performed by Daniel Osomo in the Ntumu area of southern Cameroon in 1967. It was recorded, transcribed, translated, annotated and published in Bulu and in French by S. M. Eno Belinga.¹³ Transcription of this story into Bulu simply reflects the greater development of the technologies of literacy in that region; the dialects are similar enough to cause no distortion. The epic was individually performed, in costume, with accompanying dance and music on the *mvét*. Parts were sung while parts might be dramatically spoken. One performance could last hours. The present epic consists of 1652 lines, arranged into 55 'songs', separated performatively by musical interludes.¹⁴

Mvét epic poetry is original to the composer; only the form is traditional. The text of Osomo's performance contains many of the pidgin words that have come into the language since the end of the last century. Foreign items also figure, such as vehicles (*metua*). But the basic story does not depend on twentieth-century situations. It tells of a son's brazen defiance of his father,

¹³ S. M. Eno Belinga, *L'épopée camerounaise: mvét. Moneblum ou l'homme bleu* (Yaoundé, 1978).

¹⁴ An accessible source on *mvét* oral poetics is G. and F. Towo Atangana, 'Nden-Bobo, l'araignée-toilière: conte beti, en dialecte eton du Sud Cameroun', *Africa*, xxxvi (1966), 37-61.

his exile into slavery under another headman (the Blue Man of the title), his miraculous achievements at work in the headman's village, his (ardently requited) passion for the headman's beautiful wife whom he abducts, the ensuing war between the two groups and the eventual victory. It is clear from the narrative that the hero cannot win without extraordinary powers, and it is to the origins, forms and composition of those powers that we turn. The schematic outline of the story above must serve to guide the reader; social analytical points are brought up and dwelt on as they arise in the story.

The narrative begins with a statement about individual temperament that is resoundingly endorsed by the rest of the story.

It happened like this: a man named Ondo Mba
 Had a child. He named the child Mekui-Mengomo-Ondo.
 When Mekui-Mongomo came of age he asked his father:
 'When am I going to marry?' His father replied:
 'A child of Ekan never asks his father 'When am I going to marry?'
 And he swore 'Let me disappear and meet the dead when I weep for Ngema!
 If you dare to ask me such a question I will cut off your head, or banish you.'
 This is why his son sat quietly for two days.
 Then he came again to his father to ask: 'When are you going to marry me?'

With the unambiguously accusatory 'you', the second question is even more insolent than the first.

This renegade from paternal control, Mekui-Mengomo, is the hero of the narrative. Having been repetitively and provocatively defiant of his father, he goes on to be outrageously arrogant in the face of the authority – the *nkukuma*: 'owner of wealth' – to whom his case is referred. His indifference to the consequences requires the intervention of his mother to prevent a disastrous confrontation. So the audience knows from the very first that this is a formidable character, already equipped with personal strength.

The story-line of father-son relations is one of the central dramas. It turns slowly in the first half, and then dramatically in the second half, in the son's favor. In the beginning the listeners are already prepared for the possibility that it is the son and not the father who will prevail in the struggle. When other men of their group, the Ekan-Mebe'e, are asked to suggest a punishment for Mekui-Mengomo commensurate with his transgression, three of them offer not to punish him at all but to take him over themselves to arrange his marriage on the grounds that his father 'seems poor' (p. 63). Of course, this is an insult to the father which would deeply humiliate him if it were acted on, so Mekui-Mengomo is sent into exile. But even so he is not hurried off in disgrace. Three companions volunteer to accompany him, presenting themselves so quickly that they head off all possibility of Mekui-Mengomo's father fulfilling the *nkukuma*'s offer that he himself choose his son's companions. On his way Mekui-Mengomo ceremoniously visits several of his senior male-kin: slowly and deliberately, one has the impression. One of them even comments that it is not the Ekan collectively but his father alone who exiles him, and another predicts that Mekui-Mengomo will be the cause of war. They essentially validate him, stepping outside any collective phalanx of clan disapproval. As the narrative unfolds, these men become more and more committed to Mekui-Mengomo's cause, and when his father's verbal endorsement of the marriage is needed to enable them to launch a just war three of them do not hesitate to heap public humiliation on Ondo's head to get it.

No story's moral could be more at odds with the model of elders' control of juniors through control over access to wives. Mekui-Mengomo is actually respected by his senior kinsmen – his fathers, *besa* – for his arrogant insubordination, his distant journey and his recourse to capture of his bride (literally, in a sack). His father Ondo is soundly vilified for such behavior as trying to avoid paying bridewealth, and he completely disappears from the story once his meek verbal consent to his son's marriage is given. It is one of Mekui-Mengomo's other 'fathers' who proclaims him an adult – a man, *fam* – by virtue of finding himself a wife, and it is the *nkukuma* who finally hands over the bride. The real authority over Mekui-Mengomo is Akoma Mba, the *nkukuma* (man of wealth, leader), a rather mysterious character who is 'all white'.¹⁵ The father's bluster with which the epic begins is just that: bluster. In fact, the Ntumu listener might well know this from the beginning, since Mekui-Mengomo repeats his challengingly offensive question with no apparent fear.

Up to the point in the narrative where the entire clan has recourse to divination to decide Mekui-Mengomo's fate, the powers mobilized are unmediated by either things or people. People are driven by their own natures. Both Mekui and his father animate their 'anger' by 'planting' a finger in the ground and feeling the power of the hostility rise into their heads. Several times in the narrative Mekui-Mengomo and others revitalize their own courage in this way, a gesture highly reminiscent of the Kongo chief's planting of his staff in the ground to touch base with the ancestors, as indicated by MacGaffey (to be discussed below). The editorial explanatory gloss affirms the taken-for-granted nature of this gesture: 'Stereotyped formula indicating the sublimation of human nature to the divine. This is common for the heroes of Mvet epics in the face of grave danger' (p. 279). In other words, there is a direct and personal source of power available to those with the daring to tap into it.

In spite of all this bravado, however, the hero is not the protagonist of the story all the way to its end. Mekui-Mengomo has his moments, like solos in an opera, but he is not even the center of attention in the final denouement. Whether this structure is a radical departure, either from epic style in general or from Ntumu epic style, is a question for further analysis, but it speaks volumes about political process.¹⁶ Very long passages are about other people, places and sources of power, without whose active participation and even assumption of the role of protagonist there would be no story. Ultimately and unambiguously, this is a story about the qualities and exploits of the Ekan-Mebe'e *together* as well as about those of Mekui-Mengomo.

The final source of power enters at the clan gathering to decide Mekui-Mengomo's fate. *Bian* (a 'charm' or medicine) and their owner Nnomo-Ngan ('the old man with the medicine') come into the story with the process of divination to decide where Mekui-Mengomo should be sent in exile. By this point, then, all the major sources of power have been assembled: the personal, the collective-compositional and the magical.

The narrative technique at critical moments of total social orchestration

¹⁵ His name may also relate to the word *akom*, meaning the essence, the nature of something; T. Tsala, *Dictionnaire Ewondo-Français* (Lyon, 1956), 41.

¹⁶ Variations in African epic style in modern works are illustrated by I. Okpweho, *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York, 1979), and E. Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington, 1992).

of these powers, such as the meetings and journeys that recur throughout the epic, is to *name* everything, in a great crescendo. Lists of names become stylistic units. Every participant in the collective gathering of the Ekan Mebe'e, Mekui-Mengomo's group, is named. Then every possible destination for Mekui-Mengomo's exile that is put to the oracle is named in turn: each village, each with a complex name and a clan identification, identified with a certain geographical configuration of rivers and forests, run by a leader with an equally complex name, some with their own particular *bian*, personal powers and idiosyncrasies, or their past relationship with Ekan-Mebe'e. Every village he visits on his way, every participant in all subsequent meetings: everything is named.

Doubtless dramatic tension is duly heightened by the length and complexity of these searches, journeys and meetings. But the form and repetition of this technique suggests that a highly diverse and differentiated world is being brought to life, one in which each element is individuated by name, location and powers. Even a foreign speaker can experience the general sense of diversity because often the poet attaches a brief additional background story or gives even a minor interaction some idiosyncratic dimension. But for the Ntumu listener there are undoubtedly manifold resonances to geography, history, other narratives in the *mvét* repertoire of the performer and personal genealogy that are lost to an outsider. All the names mean something; none is arbitrary. For example, the Ngomo of the hero's name refers to a dramatic technique of hunting the porcupine (*ngom*), where the animal is smoked out from deep underground and pounced on. Shrewdness and speed at the hunt are thereby indicated in the personal identity of the protagonist, introduced in the opening stanza of a story about marriage by capture. Probably actual places and histories are being invoked in the names of villages. The village of Njet-Etyle-Mimbom (p. 56) is named Cruelty Is Tied To The Beams, to indicate valor in war. The village of Anyu-d'Ayanga-Minyon (p. 56) is The Mouth That Expects Tears, that is, one that is ready for anything, including the tears of wives and children in case of attack. The village of the 'villain' is called Rising Sun, possibly invoking the East in the symbolic sense, as in the east-west ceremonial trade, *bilaba*, in which 'traditional' or local items such as ivories and wives were given westwards towards the coast and imported goods such as guns and cloth were given eastwards into the interior.¹⁷ He himself, amongst other names, carries a name meaning The Crab That Gnaws on Ivory with its Teeth.

And the proliferation is extraordinary. Altogether, in the search for a suitable place to send Mekui-Mengomo in exile, names are given to 21 places and 22 individual leaders, complete with the names of their fathers in some cases, making 35 in all. Once a place has been chosen, three named companions are chosen to accompany him, ten 'fathers' have to be visited, each invoked by name, and then the entire journey into exile is described in similar terms, again repeating names, places and personal incidents: another 15 named people and 13 places. At several other points there are shorter, but structurally similar searches, journeys, inventories of invitees, lists of ancestors and minor speakers at meetings. The total epic refers by name to 12 major actors and 82 other persons, to 79 places, 15 groups beyond the bounds of the Ekan-Mebe'e and 8 *mvog* (descent groups) within it. In fact,

¹⁷ Bilaba is described in P. Laburthe-Tolra, *Les seigneurs de la forêt* (Paris, 1981), 360-1.

there are very few generic 'extras' in this heroic world that would be equivalents to the anonymous Greek chorus; the only two un-named categories are women and slaves. Women are referred to as 'mothers', except for Mekui-Mengomo's bride and the female village leader, and the other slaves in the village of Efen-Ndon to which the diviner consigns Mekui-Mengomo's fate are never given personal identities.¹⁸ Many of those named, even if they never appear again and never influence the central story line (at least, not in an outsider's reading), are given a vignette, an odd characteristic, a *bian*, or a special power. There can be no mistaking the diversity and complexity of the world in which Mekui-Mengomo pursues his singular ambitions.

It is worth describing several of the particularities that the narrative gives, beyond the names, because they convey – even to the complete outsider – a vivid sense of the peopling of this world. One Angono is asked by the oracle whether he can take Mekui-Mengomo in (p. 79). This is a man who will never allow anyone else to bear the same name, and when he finds one who does he challenges him to a contest over 'who deserves to be the husband of his wife'. The singer asks rhetorically and tantalizingly, perhaps hinting at another story in his repertoire: 'Who is worthy of relating what happened between these two in the depths of the forest?', and then passes back to the main narrative leaving his question hanging in the air. Then there is a country where three young men (*bendoman*) have been arguing for seven years over the orientation of the ridge beam of a new men's house (*aba*) they are building, until it finally rots. Mekui-Mengomo passes through a place where the people raise no sheep or goats, but only elephants, which they kill in honor of the men who have married their daughters (p. 97). There are areas rich in food (p. 81), a race of White people (p. 83), a man who sings seven times when the cock sings once (p. 101), a 'queen' (actually *njoe bot*, a speaker or leader, but in this case a woman) who has a mysterious power (p. 73) and so on. The *nkukuma* Akoma sends a swift runner to fetch one Awu Ntu'u, who happens to be eating at the time and is so annoyed at being interrupted by Akoma's demands that he 'almost finishes off the young man with his flaming spear' (p. 225). This extraordinary cast of characters is accessed by Nnomo-Ngan by divination and by various messengers and journeys, but it is less a magical world – in fact magic figures relatively little in these personal descriptions – than a land of roistering and outspoken eccentricity. People do things out of enthusiasm, defiance or collaboration, but no-one ever does anything out of straight obedience.

To resume the narrative: Mekui-Mongomo's exploits as a slave in the village belonging to Efen-Ndon are, by comparison, re-focussed on himself and his own powers, only one of which is magical (and unexplained). Otherwise he animates himself by evoking his own 'anger' and recruits the other slaves to his own purposes by bravado, by the provision of plenty of food and by the promise of freedom. He attracts the headman's wife through his own attributes (dress, behavior), confronts her husband directly to demand payment for the work done, and – again animating his own anger – kidnaps the woman when his demand is refused. Throughout his exile in

¹⁸ We have to remain aware that this is a single performance and not a total repertoire; in the larger repertoire of *mvet* narratives there are stories in which women play a much larger role.

Efen-Ndon's village he is strictly running on his own extraordinary personal capacities. After the long passages about a multiple world, this reconcentration on Mekui-Mengomo as a singular person has a powerful dramatic effect.

It is during the battle that ensues when he kidnaps his bride that multiple powers again have to be sought out and combined. Since this is the climax and Mekui-Mengomo starts out in dire straits on foreign territory, the epic narrative technique of drawing out and dramatizing each step in the ultimate victory can perhaps inform our understanding of the sociology of differential knowledge and differential powers. We are already convinced by the structure of the narrative of several essential components: the primacy of personal temperament which is the material for the development of differential knowledge, the independent political positions taken within Mekui-Mengomo's group, the vast variety of the social and environmental world, and the mediating power of *mebian* which are individually owned. The denouement reconfigures these elements into a potent force.

Mekui-Mengomo's first resort is a prayer to named 'fathers' to inform Ngomo-Ngan, the diviner, of his desperate situation. He is duly informed by one whose name closely resembles the name of the clan itself (Mebe'e Me-Ekan, as compared to Ekan Mebe'e¹⁹), and who – by implication from the later story – is in fact in the land of the dead. Informed by them of the hero's plight, Ngomo-Ngan bathes in a potion of *mebian* (medicines) and goes to consult with Akoma (the *nkukuma* who mediated Mekui-Mengomo's exile). They recruit people, one by one, for help and advice. Each man is named, described and has his particular powers delineated. For example, one character who personally fends off the first attack of Efen-Ndon is given three different names, is placed on a genealogy and described as 'having no fear of telling the truth to anyone' (p. 209). Later he is depicted smoking a pipe 'as immense as a large cooking pot' that requires a whole storehouse of tobacco to fill (p. 243). Finding that Efen-Ndon is using Mekui's father's renunciation of his son to claim him ineligible for marriage – and therefore totally unfounded in his claims on the woman – the clan head then calls another (named) youth, 'fleet of foot', to fetch a (named) drummer to pronounce a public diatribe against the father and to arouse him in support of his son. Each section of the clan is told to gather. Brought together, each one named as they arrive, they are told of the situation, and each individual man steps forward to identify with the cause. As they do, some are described according to their idiosyncrasies: one comes with no weapon (a very unusual thing in a society where every man always travels with a spear); one has ears that hang so low that he ties them in with his belt; one is graphically tall and thin, with legs as narrow as fingers and a body as tall as a tree. This gathering of oddities can hardly be depicted as 'the solidarity of the sibling group'²⁰ in action! It is explicitly a configuration of difference.

The group that finally gathers together includes the father himself, who rallies to his son's cause. This army of Mekui's 'brothers' sets out to rescue

¹⁹ These names refer to an abbreviated genealogy of about thirty generations. Ekan is the closest ancestor to the present population, Nna is the ancestor of the Ekan, and Mebe'e is the divinity.

²⁰ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde, *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (London, 1950).

him and the young woman. As the battle intensifies, so does the use of *mebian*. Only after 'two months' of fighting that end in a stalemate do they regroup for new strategies, involving – again – a search through the named people who might contribute new resources. This time they are all extraordinary, going far beyond the mundane, though differentiated, characteristics of Mekui-Mengomo's brothers. The search is now for specific knowledge: of the place in the land of the shades where the bellows-workers breathe life into the enemy, Efen-Ndon. The key mediators are the young twin sons of the 'white' *nkukuma*. (They are referred to as *mongo*: child or descendant, not even *ndoman*: a young man). They are not human, being all covered in scales. They in turn start searching for the 'son of the shades' (*mone bekon*), named Nsono-Nsono. Only at the third personage contacted after Nsono-Nsono do the twins finally find someone who knows the place and can show it to them. This person holds a version of the clan name, Mebe'e-Me-Ekan, and has intervened briefly at an earlier stage, to relay Mengomo's prayer to the diviner. It is he, one who straddles the phenomenal and ancestral worlds, who owns the *bian* that ultimately stifles the breath of Efen-Ndon. The *bian* is applied to the ground, taking away the bellows-workers' clarity of vision; then it is applied again to reveal the container holding an effigy of the enemy; again it is applied to open the container, and finally to spill out all the *mebian* from the box on 'Efen-Ndon's' chest. Loss of the *mebian* in his effigy takes away all Efen-Ndon's powers. In the ensuing confrontation of armies, Efen-Ndon simply collapses and the fight is essentially over. Akoma accuses him of failing to recompense 'my son' (*mon wom*) for the work he did in his village, takes away all his *mebian* and marks his body as a sign that he has 'encountered the Ekan'. The next move is remarkable and attests dramatically to the revaluation and incorporation of conquered strength rather than its elimination: Efen-Ndon is reinstated as a 'Notable', as a spokesman or giver of orders. The term *ejoe* evokes leadership by speech rather than by wealth (p. 275); he is still, thereby, subordinate to Akoma but remains an autonomous person.

In three short lines the marriage is made and the story is declared over: 'I have said everything I know about this *mvvet* epic story'. It is the collective composition of Ekan and their 'spokesman' who have the last word, not the hero. As mentioned already Mekui-Mengomo almost completely disappears from the story well before the end. Medan, one of the men of Ekan Mebe'e, takes over the leadership of the battle. After he proclaims to Mekui-Mengomo that 'You have found a wife, from now on you are a man' (p. 255), the latter re-appears only in the very last stanza, to be given – in the passive voice, although his name is repeated – the young woman as his wife. The wife in her turn is more or less informed by Akoma that she has been captured and will simply stay with them: 'a fish once caught does not return to the river', and the translator adds for dramatic effect 'A catch is a catch' (p. 255). Once she has given initial assent and Mekui-Mengomo has proved himself, that is, once the capture has been effectuated, the task of conserving it is given over to many others. During that part of the narrative, control of events is constantly shifted from one protagonist to another, with the final coup being made by a totally new character. Segments devoted to personal power alternate with segments devoted to wide lateral networks. While the *nkukuma* is a central mobilizer of this wealth-in-people, he is only the

instigator of recruitment and not himself the person who knows or can mobilize the key individuals. Every important act is made by a man who stands at one or more removes from the *nkukuma*, and each one's relative autonomy is expressed by a story of initial refusal, or delay, or openly expressed disagreement. Protagonists, mediators and actors pass the initiative back and forth, each one identified by name as if they were equally important to the overall story. Only those who know can act and not everyone knows the same things, as is repeatedly implied by the searching and listing of these named men. *Mebian* turn up in unpredictable places, and even the diviner does not have the *bian* to find Efen-Ndon's source of life. Numbers alone can only hold Efen-Ndon at bay. Neither personal qualities nor number of 'brothers', nor even personal capture of certain *mebian* is sufficient to win. One needs the people and along with them their knowledge: of other people and of other powers.

The basic philosophy of this narrative is supported by the ethnography of Southern Cameroonian peoples, as we discuss in more detail below. Koch writes that there are qualities 'that live in the individual from his birth, which he has no need for magic to arouse, but there is always the indispensable need for magical rites to conserve'.²¹ Each individual person's power is itself a composition, put together through various means, but means in which the verb '*bi*' figures prominently. *Bi* can be most simply translated as 'to take'; but in various places in the literature it is given the meaning of 'to seize or capture', a variety of connective and disjointive acts, and the critically important gloss of 'to conserve or retain'.²² In this latter meaning it forms the root concept of *bian*, literally then 'a thing to conserve', but usually translated as 'charm' or 'medicine'. Personal abilities exist first, then they can be augmented, conserved and actualized within the person, making that person – as was suggested in an earlier article²³ – *mfan mot*, a real person, singular to themselves and recognized as an adept by the collectivity.

The social process is about putting these singularities together. Where knowledge was plural and distributed, the ability to range over vast differentiated social and geographical space for exactly the right components to produce a particular desired goal was intrinsic to power. Although Laburthe-Tolra uses the term 'charismatic' with respect to this kind of power, indicating a personal brilliance that certainly was at play, in more analytically precise terms the leader-follower relationship shown in *Moneblum* is quite different from the classic case of charisma, where the subsumption of the follower in the leader's agenda is assumed.²⁴ In fact, Laburthe-Tolra's qualification of the temporary nature of even charismatic leadership makes this clear: 'It is on the basis of his exceptional personality that a big chief can regroup, for a certain time and a precise objective, a voluntary consensus'²⁵ *Moneblum* is an extended example of exactly what this involved: its bases, its philosophies, modes of expression and organizational principles. Such concepts as charisma, collective solidarity or big man/

²¹ H. Koch, *Magie et chasse dans la forêt camerounaise* (Paris, 1968), 17.

²² Definitions in Tsala, *Dictionnaire*, 92. Eno-Belinga suggests the following as glosses of this semantic element, that has very wide meanings: to be close to, 'we' (the first person plural), to have, possess, break, rupture, move house, receive, put and open very wide.

²³ Guyer, 'Wealth'.

²⁴ See C. Lindholm, *Charisma* (Cambridge MA, 1990).

²⁵ Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba*, 840.

clientage, all of which imply a counterposition of individual and society, are clearly inadequate to depict this process in general analytical terms.

PART 2: MODELS OF EQUATORIAL SOCIETY
AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF KNOWLEDGE

There is no readily available concept that grasps the multiplicity, the connective facets and the non-boundedness of the configuration to which the Equatorial ethnography refers; no theory comes to terms with the mosaic of differentiation that one understands from *Moneblum*. Unbounded and volatile, knowledge was embedded in persons by nature, by purchase, by capture and by conservation, resulting in a vital variation that could be aggregated only through compositional social processes. Neither solidary nor conflictual as a major mode of being (as in older structural models), nor vacillating between the two (as in dynamic models), nor resolved into domination and accumulation (as in neo-Marxist models), nor yet simply a product of indeterminate 'practise', composition is a different process altogether. Free-standing elements have necessary connective interfaces that are accessible to one another only situationally. Society is not integrated; it is a constant improvisation along a continuum from centrifugality to brilliant synergism. The solidarity, conflict and domination that our models capture limited realities; for gender, generation and slave/dependent/free status there is a certain stability of convention that the models have highlighted as 'structure'. But even there, as the epic shows, and certainly for relations amongst adult men, group structures and relations of inequality are ephemeral instantiations of singularity, multiplicity and connective receptivity whose operation – like musical conventions rather than authoritarian rules – infringe only conditionally and transitorily on the autonomy that makes personal singularity possible in the first place.

For this kind of differentiation we have very limited terminology, partly for philosophical reasons to do with the scientific need to bound phenomena in order to conceptualize them²⁶ but also partly due to the continuing weight of evolutionary theory. The following quotations from Sahlins' long-used book on *Tribesmen* express the more immediate problem within anthropology and its intellectual lineage: 'Perhaps most critical in giving a tribal people that measure of coherence and identity they do possess is their cultural similarity ... they have a common destiny or, more technically, a "mechanical solidarity"'; 'Emile Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* ... was the point of departure for anthropological treatment of segmentary societies'.²⁷ Familiar images of uniformity, closure and adaptive rationales for social life in 'simple' societies stand in the way of other formulations. First, we have difficulties in conceptualizing any difference other than the mutually exclusive categories of age and gender, formal occupation and hierarchical position. There are no sociological terms to cover the consummate dancer and speaker, nor the wife who complements and brings out her husband's

²⁶ Although for a fascinating discussion of Aristotle's transgression of his own principles here, and the implications for approaches in anthropology, see G. Schrempf, 'Aristotle's other self: on the boundless subject of anthropological discourse', in George Stocking (ed.), *Romantic Motives: Essays on Anthropological Sensibility* (Madison, 1989), 10-43.

²⁷ M. D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), 23, 114.

luck at the hunt. Then we have difficulties in conceptualizing open rather than relatively closed societies and cultures, even where mobility is a key feature of the social dynamic.²⁸ Finally, the established image of 'simple societies' can prevent recognition of processes that cannot be related to kinship and adaptation. Diversity in production becomes adaptation to risk, rather than a process of multiplicity that spills over the bounds of necessity to become – as Dupré argues for the Nzabi²⁹ – actually a determinant of the human ecology itself.

It is worth pausing briefly over the convoluted intellectual struggles that characterize Western thinking about individuality and growth and which make it so difficult to incorporate Equatorial societies. Enlightenment thinking about individuality and change emphasized the modern rupture from the collective embeddedness of identity in traditional societies. Simmel, for example, outlines the two modes of thinking about the individual and growth that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the equal/free/uniform concept that underlay free competition and democratic theory and the 'doctrine of differentiated personality' that underlay the division of labor.³⁰ Traditional societies were assumed to emphasize group identification, and indeed the main thrust of anthropological theory has been group structures and processes. Even though there are studies of individuals, and innovative suggestions about the interplay in law between individual and collective responsibility,³¹ little work in anthropology has been devoted to personal singularity and social multiplicity *as social and cultural values*, fostered and created. Findings about personal singularity in Africa are still reported with a note of puzzlement and challenge: Riesman, for example, writes that a scholar was 'surprised to find ... how personal and idiosyncratic her subject's knowledge was'.³²

These blind spots are much less evident in the ethnography, however, than they are in the theory. In fact, the theory has *always* been at odds with the ethnography on this point. The syntheses of African kinship studies published in the 1950s and 1960s³³ emphasized lineage structures and closed systems. But the same scholars who contributed to the theory of the lineage also described local concepts of individuation and drew attention – especially

²⁸ Kopytoff (ed.), *African Frontier*, for example, in an enormously useful and provocative approach to the 'African frontier' nevertheless sees frontier societies as essentially conservative rather than innovative, closed in their conceptions while open in their geographical vistas. But one cannot succeed in new environments without a thirst for learning. It is highly unlikely that resettlement was such a 'mechanical' process. The mobility with which Kopytoff is concerned was taking place in the context of experimentation with new cultigens from the New World. Innovative ecological knowledge needs to be part of the paradigm.

²⁹ G. Dupré, *Un ordre et sa destruction* (Paris, 1982).

³⁰ G. Simmel, *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago, 1971), 225.

³¹ S. Moore, 'Legal liability and evolutionary interpretation; some aspects of strict liability, self-help, and collective responsibility', in her *Law as Process: An Anthropological Approach* (London and Boston, 1978), 82–134.

³² P. Riesman, 'The person and the life cycle in African social life and thought', *African Studies Review*, XXIX (1986), 113.

³³ The classic is Radcliffe-Brown and Forde, *Kinship*, although Michael Rowlands and Victor Manfredi have both independently reminded me that Forde himself took a very different perspective, more in tune with the one presented here.

in the case of Audrey Richards³⁴ – to the relevance of personal difference to theoretical issues, in her case the study of symbolism. They had documented the Igbo *ikenga*, the Yoruba *ori* and the Tallensi *nuor-yin*, all concepts of personal realization, all objects of artistic elaboration and religious devotion. Fortes' *theory* of 'Oedipus and Job'³⁵ is a commentary on the structural tensions of generational relations, whereas his *ethnography* also suggests some conceptions of the differentiation of life pathways that could be modified and moulded by assiduous cultivation – from within the person and from without. But even though such classic sources exist, there is little sustained social history or social theory of African concepts of self-valuation, nor of the art such as the Igbo *ikenga* figure that represents them, critical though they may be to an understanding of the vast social and cultural growth of the centuries before colonization. Horton's important article on social psychologies shows the way by pointing out the variability in the 'positive appreciation of diversity in life-style and personality type'³⁶ in four societies in West Africa and linking it to diversity in social structure. It seems, however, when we look at Equatorial Africa, that the relationship between knowledge and social structure can be both more reciprocal and more historically dynamic than his analysis suggests.

In his classic monograph on the Fang published in 1913, Tessimann described the value placed on diversity quite clearly and indicated its unamenability to reductionist explanations. In contradiction to the almost-contemporaneous Durkheimian position on mechanical solidarity, he wrote that 'Among the Pangwe the division of labor and specialization in all areas of artistic and intellectual endeavor is extreme'.³⁷ Even in dispersed societies where travel was dangerous and all logic might dictate the self-subsistence of small communities that Meillassoux³⁸ assumed in his seminal reconceptualization of African societies, Tessimann writes '[T]his specialization of the Pahouin that one finds in all domains' means that 'it can happen that one has to trace a long path, or even undertake a journey to distant places to acquire a stool, a bow or any other object'.³⁹

Openness to new knowledge is another area where model-building and historical ethnography parted company. Evans-Pritchard wrote three extraordinarily detailed articles on Zande borrowing from neighboring peoples which document massive innovation and the spread of knowledge, of witchcraft as well as crops, without which 'the political development of the Azande could hardly have taken place'.⁴⁰ Zande society may be *analyzed* as

³⁴ A. Richards, *Chisungu: A Girls' Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia* (London, 1956).

³⁵ M. Fortes, *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (Cambridge, 1959).

³⁶ R. Horton, 'Social psychologies: African and western', in Fortes, *Oedipus and Job* (Cambridge, rev. ed. 1983), 60. ³⁷ G. Tessimann, *Die Pangwe* (Berlin, 1913), 206.

³⁸ C. Meillassoux, 'Essai d'interprétation du phénomène économique dans les sociétés traditionnelles d'autosubsistance', *Cah. Ét. Afr.*, 1 (1961), 38–67.

³⁹ Tessimann, *Pangwe*, section reprinted in P. Laburthe-Tolra and C. Falgayrettes-Leveay, *Fang* (Paris, 1992), 199.

⁴⁰ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'A contribution to the study of Zande culture', *Africa*, xxx (1960), 309–24; *idem*, 'A further contribution to the study of Zande culture', *Africa*, xxxiii (1963), 183–97; *idem*, 'A final contribution to the study of Zande culture', *Africa*, xxxv (1965), 1–7. Quotation from 'A contribution', 322.

a structure but it was *composed* by a complex history of the growth and social organization of knowledge for which Evans-Pritchard's own writings are the essential source.

This oddly contradictory intellectual situation with respect to the theory of group structures and description of collective processes was generally acknowledged by the 1960s and 1970s, and on a variety of grounds. It was addressed, however, in what now seems a piecemeal fashion that left in place evolutionary assumptions about the nature of differentiation in segmentary societies. Introduced at the end of the 1970s, wealth-in-people met several important needs. It was a step away from structures and towards processes, thus taking care of the static, closed group-centered analysis of previous works. And it was vague enough to make space, following a period of theoretical 'boiling energy' in the 1960s and 1970s, for theoretical issues to be put on the back burner to simmer gently and for a variety of ethnographic and historical endeavors to be pursued. Wealth-in-people was launched in the 1970s as a translation into non-Marxist terms of the neo-Marxist kinship or lineage mode of production, and – like the original – tends to stress relations of control, that is, differentiation by hierarchy. In Meillassoux's (1981) formulation of the kinship mode, at low population densities the control of leaders cannot be effectuated on the basis of control of material production. Larger social units are built on the control of reproduction, that is management of marriage and of all affiliation processes. At a certain point of numerical growth even marriage and affiliation drift out of control because they become 'statistically possible' within social groups without mediation by leadership. At this point, he argues, authority needs to 'devise and develop a coercive and authoritarian ideology... a terrorism based on superstition... inflicted on dependents, young people and above all pubescent women'.⁴¹ The central dynamic is one of numerical addition and control of pools of wealth – in people, as producers and reproducers – analogous to the accumulative dynamics of capitalism.⁴² Knowledge becomes the method of control of accumulation at a particular point, a latecomer that can be unmasked as ideology and superstition.

Critiques of this stripped-down model found the homogenization of different kinds of relationships unhelpful and the functional approach to culture unacceptable.⁴³ But the idea that rights in people could be the basis of accumulation and that power was a vitally relevant concept resonated strongly across the theoretical spectrum of African studies, to the extent that the concept is now invoked in a very general way as a shorthand for many syndromes of inter-personal dependency and social network-building that clearly involve strategizing, investing and otherwise cultivating interpersonal ties at the expense of personal wealth in material things. Historians and historical anthropologists were particularly receptive to a concept that

⁴¹ C. Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge, 1981), 45.

⁴² Meillassoux's later work, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Arthur Goldschmidt (Chicago, 1991), gives more space to consider the breadth of value invested in dependents by their natal communities, since he argues that the cost of acquiring people by capture (as slaves) is very low by comparison with the cost of raising them.

⁴³ See W. MacGaffey, 'On the moderate usefulness of modes of production', *Can. J. Afr. Studies*, XIX (1985), 51–7.

preserved the centrality of rights-in-people, which had been the focus of the classics of structural functional anthropology, without requiring that they embrace the assumptions about equilibrium in bounded and integrated social orders that were characteristic of that theoretical framework. Kopytoff and Miers⁴⁴ applied the idea to slavery and other dependency relationships. Caroline Bledsoe⁴⁵ was one of the first to use it prominently to describe marriage and social networks, in Sierra Leone. While Berry⁴⁶ does not invoke wealth-in-people as a concept, she does trace out the logic of 'investment in social relations' as a means of dealing with uncertainties in the accumulative process in West Africa. Miller and Vansina both invoke wealth-in-people as a continuous principle in the social history of Equatorial African societies in the centuries-long interface with new environments and new neighboring polities on the one hand and European trade on the other.⁴⁷ In short, the neo-Marxist inspiration has been generally assimilated as offering a powerful series of lines of enquiry and interpretation.

As suggested, however, the users of wealth-in-people abandoned the Marxist intellectual agenda while preserving some of its armature, in particular the focus on control and accumulation. Rey and Meillassoux had been clear and explicit in their theoretical purpose. A Marxist conceptual framework was applied to African societies for two reasons: to incorporate all social orders adequately into a single general theory and to provide the means of analyzing their interface with capitalism. The analysis of 'articulation' is impossible from the vantage point of a substantivist theoretical position that 'Here the economy seems dominant... there everything is "bathed in a celestial light" of religious conceptions'.⁴⁸ The extension of some of the analytical vocabulary for capitalism – accumulation, appropriation, production, ideology, and most controversially, class relations – was therefore part of a specific intellectual endeavor (and one that remains highly relevant). It could not, almost by definition, do justice to what ethnographers must take as their primary goal, namely the documentation of originality. Perhaps more seriously for the theory itself, the focus on those specific relations by which articulation *could be* achieved means that the full extent of destruction and loss of those institutions that *could not* (or were not allowed to) accommodate in any way is not theorized at all. Knowledge, whose contours extended far beyond the ideology and superstition of hierarchical control, was one of these losses.

Why, then, has 'accumulation', out of all the concepts contributed by Marxist scholars, seemed plausible enough to non-Marxists to hold over? In fact, it is probably one of the least plausible of all, since in Marx's own theory it applied to two quintessentially capitalist processes: primitive accumulation as the means whereby initial control of resources is established by a capitalist class, and routine accumulation whereby capital is augmented in the production process through the appropriation of surplus value, in a money form, from labor. The way in which we now use the term, however, does not imply a capitalist dynamic of continual growth. It is a shorthand way of indicating that wealth is pooled and power is generated. Accumulation has

⁴⁴ Miers and Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa*. ⁴⁵ Bledsoe, *Women and Marriage*.

⁴⁶ S. Berry, 'Social institutions and access to resources', *Africa*, LIX (1989), 41–55.

⁴⁷ Miller, *Way*; Vansina, *Paths*.

⁴⁸ M. D. Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976), 211.

the advantage over Polanyi's 'redistribution' in that it incorporates power and does not presume largesse, but otherwise it is not much more illuminating when taken out of the context of capitalism.⁴⁹

The main problem with the concept of accumulation in this non-Marxist usage is precisely the quality that makes it plausible in the first place, namely that the simple arithmetical processes of addition and compound interest relative to a straightforward realist world of identifiable things and people 'fit' closely with old theoretical assumptions that segmentary societies can be understood primarily by material adaptation and social simplicity. The logic is that at low population densities there is a problem of control for which kinship and esoteric knowledge are the solution. Accumulation adds people and things to each other under these seemingly fragile conditions. But a variety of ethnographic clues makes this seem inadequate. Dupré⁵⁰ argues that it was the pursuit of multiplicity in productive techniques that *determined* population ecology in the forest, and not vice versa; the personal cultivation represented by the *ikengas* demands explanation; Tessmann's ethnography and Evans-Pritchard's Zande history need incorporating; the messages of texts such as *Moneblum* have to be assimilated; and the impact of political domination and demographic collapse in the early twentieth century on processes that might otherwise have loomed larger in the colonial ethnography has to be thought through.

It may seem like hair-splitting to insist on a distinction between accumulation and composition, especially since some of those who use 'accumulation' clearly intend it to cover a range of processes. But the two concepts focus on very different dynamics, one quantitative and one qualitative, one additive and the other synergistic, one achieving numbers and the other patterns, one risking loss and isolation and the other courting the dangerous tensions of centrifugality.⁵¹

Equatorial ethnography and history constitute an extended example of the partially coherent, sometimes tense, always open dynamics that composition can be. Apprehension of the openness and volatility necessarily attendant on social composition possibly explains why scholars of the Equatorial forest seem particularly ill at ease with *any* of the standard models from the general anthropological and historical repertoire to explore and explain growth, and why, therefore, the region fits so poorly into comparative studies. For example, Vansina⁵² suggests that the basis of Equatorial society was particular concepts about groups and the spatial referents of those groups: the district, the village and the house: that is, it is not kinship as such, nor scarce labor as such, nor the dynamics around control of reproduction, and

⁴⁹ Except when a relation to capitalism is analyzed, in which case it may be used in the classic sense.

⁵⁰ Dupré, *Ordre et destruction*.

⁵¹ They are recognised as different processes in one theoretical classic. Simmel distinguishes between kinds of exchange that involve sacrifice, such as the economic exchanges of which accumulation is a sub-type, and those that 'release an inner energy we would not otherwise know what to do with... When we communicate intellectual matters in conversation, these are not thereby diminished'. He goes on to argue that, in the latter case, 'to be allowed to contribute is itself a gain... the response of the other (is) an unearned gift'; *Individuality*, 44-5. In other words, composition is a situational process that adds (towards completion) without depriving, whereas accumulation is a permanent structural process that adds (towards pooling) by deprivation.

⁵² Vansina, *Paths*.

certainly not a segmentary lineage ideology, but rather key social constructs particular to the region that provide the thread of continuity and elaboration through centuries of growth and change. In a different mode of exploration, one that starts with the intricacies of the use of the material base – that is space – rather than linguistic evidence for social concepts, Georges Dupré nevertheless also veers away from using general analytical terminology. He argues that the basis of the (Nzabi) social order was not the use of the generically defined resource ‘land’, but much more specifically the Equatorial forest, in all its differentiated glory.⁵³ The multiple modes of forest exploitation required delicate balancing which circumscribed and moulded the socio-political possibilities. Both Vansina and Dupré, scholars of the region that they are, thereby skirt around the problem of general models, not far enough away from them to lose the possibility of inspiration, but clearly not embracing them either, in order to home in on regionally meaningful characteristics: the house and the forest. These and other detailed works, however, are quite clear that it was knowledge – knowledge of the forest, knowledge of things, knowledge that generated things and things that embodied knowledge – that constituted *both* the material *and* the human basis of life in these societies that walked the richly complex and variegated borderlands between hunting and gathering on the one hand and agriculture and artisanship on the other, both of them in a constantly shifting relationship to ceremonial exchange, regional trade and the expanding international market.

There is also much empirical support for the inference that all kinds of knowledge – ecological, technical, religious and aesthetic – constitute an important thread in pre-colonial social history. Vansina’s synthesis of ‘the Equatorial tradition’ over several hundred years suggests that cultigens were added, ecologies colonized, peoples encountered and integrated (or conquered), religious cults formed, types of currency introduced and reshaped, imported western goods put to use, styles developed in the plastic and musical arts, and kinship concepts elaborated. Productive knowledge is shown in all its floescence in works such as Koch’s 267-page book on magic and the hunt among the Badjoue, which is a veritable encyclopedia of the forest habitat: names and ideas about flora, fauna and their vastly varied habits; appropriate types of trap, net, tool or weapon, each made from the appropriate material; ways of training dogs; ways of organizing hunting parties; and so on, all informed by spiritual practises that conserve different kinds of luck and promote success. In its very detail, the description opens up yet further vistas: of cultivation, fishing, cooking and feeding that complete the ‘food chain’ and have their own concept of (female) luck associated with them, and of other aspects of a way of life where luck is ‘essentially personal’ and undergoes fluctuations in intensity according to varying circumstances. Socializing a child into success involves ‘a long series of rituals’ with varied and complex medical treatments because it is a world of ‘perpetual movement (where) all that moves has sense and all that stops ages and dies.’⁵⁴

New knowledge was always being added. Much of the ethnography of technical life in Equatorial Africa reports that people maintain a memory of

⁵³ Dupré, *Ordre et destruction*, 107.

⁵⁴ Koch, *Magie*, 16, 19, 38, 255.

its outside and personal/individual origins: the Fang learned how to survive in the forest from the pygmies;⁵⁵ the Mvele learned about certain ingredients for the smelt, also from the pygmies;⁵⁶ the Beembe name particular leaders who knew how to control nature in certain ways: to cook on a thatched roof, to influence the rain, walk on water and otherwise manipulate it in the struggle against sorcery, to turn a pond into a swamp to thwart the enemy, to plunge the village into night and even to create an entire new social order.⁵⁷ As Fernandez writes, people 'were taught different and not fully compatible things by different aspects of their traditional culture',⁵⁸ because the culture itself existed on the frontiers of knowledge.

Concepts from the capitalist vocabulary are clumsy and inaccurate to capture the character of this wealth-in-knowledge. If people were assets solely by virtue of a quantitative demographic process, as 'labor' or 'power' or 'resources', then 'control' and 'accumulation' are usable concepts. But if people were also assets by virtue of knowledge, and if there was a value placed on multiplicity and expansive frontiers, then aggregation could not proceed primarily by domination and appropriation. We need other terms to describe the social dynamics and social history of this key resource, starting from a re-examination of how composition seems to have worked according to the ethnography.

PART 3: ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCES ON SINGULARITY AND COMPOSITION

Singularity

As Tessmann described, the preservation and extension of knowledge in Equatorial Africa were quite consistently personalistic. Different people took on different parts of the overall expanding corpus, largely by choice rather than the ascription of parentage or assignment within secret societies. Particular people were famous and known widely by name, like Ngoa Asse, the last iron smelter and blacksmith of the northern Eton area of Cameroon,⁵⁹ or Jean-Jacques Aba Ebanga, the Mvele musician, or Daniel Osomo, the troubadour-composer whose work has already been analyzed. The names preserved in oral traditions indicate remarkable persons, such as Mwa Bukulu of the Beembe,⁶⁰ as well as the nodes in genealogical segmentation or succession emphasized by segmentary theory. As Vansina points out from

⁵⁵ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 57.

⁵⁶ J. I. Guyer, 'Indigenous currencies and the history of marriage payments; a case study from Cameroon', *Cah. Ét. Afr.*, xxvi (1986), 577-610.

⁵⁷ G. Dupré, *Les naissances d'une société: espace et historicité chez les Beembe du Congo* (Paris, 1985), 121-5. Certain of these characteristics may apply to Africa more generally. Riesman, 'Person', notes how consistently medical and spiritual knowledge is thought to originate in or be animated by personal inspiration, and Sandra Barnes develops the concept of 'outside knowledge' as a general social phenomenon on the basis of Yoruba history: 'Ritual, power and outside knowledge', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, xx (1990), 248-67. But the creation and acquisition of knowledge, from within and from outside, is particularly highly developed and exuberant in the Equatorial region, negating any general theory of closed systems, even before one includes the history of trade in material goods.

⁵⁸ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 563.

⁵⁹ J. I. Guyer, 'The iron currencies of southern Cameroon', *Symbols* (Dec. 1985), 2-5, 15-16.

⁶⁰ Dupré, *Naissances*.

the Kuba dictionary, there were many specialist skills (*unkete*): 'bakers, musicians, surgeons, ship captains, judges, flutists, wood-carvers and rhetoricians'.⁶¹ Medicines were many and varied; their inventors and owners must have been many and varied.

The sources are more detailed on the social context of medical than technical artisanal knowledge, so we use it as an example of processes of knowledge acquisition, storage and use that were clearly more general. Sometimes the historical ethnography tends to refer to *the nganga*, as if there were 'general practitioners'. For example, Wrigley's⁶² generalization about the embodiment of the sacred in leadership implies that there was something unique about the position of mystical leadership. Perhaps so, but in terms of spiritual knowledge a leader was *primus inter pares*. MacGaffey implies that each of the very many *minkisi* of the Bakongo had its own *nganga*.⁶³ There was one for every disease and distress. In fact, there was an identity between the holder/maker and the medicine, such that the medicine could punish the owner for neglect or misuse. Laburthe-Tolra also writes that for the Bene each *ngengan* specialized in one domain,⁶⁴ and this in a system which comprised – to judge from his description – *mebian* ('charms, medicines') for success, wealth, war, the hunt, eloquence, physical strength, fertility, in fact every human endeavor. All success and welfare were mediated by *mebian*. Entire groups as well as individuals might be known for a particular skill, as Laburthe-Tolra describes the Kolo being known for the charms endowing them with oratorical skill. There was no opposition between natural and supernatural, and no monopoly of the supernatural: 'the world is simply more or less marvelous',⁶⁵ with different people and peoples identifying with different marvels.

MacGaffey's review of Kongo medical expertise describes the enormous variety of medicines in great detail. In a sample from a collection of *minkisi* made in the first two decades of this century, there are seven indigenously named types for divination, 22 for healing, ten for wealth and warfare, and six for attack. And he writes 'There were as many *minkisi* as there are diseases'.⁶⁶ Tessmann's⁶⁷ inventory of charms for the Fang lists 109 for success at war and in hunting alone. Hunting is often considered the oldest and most deeply spiritualized of African productive activities, but 67 of these are 'for the gun',⁶⁸ which illustrates again the expansive dynamism of knowledge with respect to novel technologies.

Powers could be acquired either by spiritual revelation or by initiation, both processes that limit access only by personal capacity or dedication. MacGaffey describes several avenues, both obligatory (due to affliction with the condition in question) and voluntary. Expertise had to be bought: 'Initiation and cure required the payment of prescribed fees'.⁶⁹ Laburthe-

⁶¹ J. Vansina, 'The dictionary and the historian', *History in Africa*, 1 (1974), 149.

⁶² C. Wrigley, 'Review article: The *longue durée* in the heart of darkness', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XXXIII (1992), 129–34.

⁶³ W. MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo, Commented by Themselves* (Bloomington, 1991), 33.

⁶⁴ Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba*, 1189.

⁶⁵ Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba*, 1194.

⁶⁶ MacGaffey, *Art*, 33.

⁶⁷ Tessmann, *Pangwe*, ii, 164–5.

⁶⁸ Tessmann, *Pangwe*, ii, 164–5, quoted in Laburthe-Tolra *Minlaaba*, 1234.

⁶⁹ MacGaffey, *Art*, 33.

Tolra goes further, to state that 'the owner *could not* give them for free without sacrificing their efficacy' and that currencies 'were an integral part of their (the charms') modes of use'.⁷⁰ The only possible free gift of a medicine involved the *bian akuma*, the medicine for enrichment, that a man gave to his sister's son as a 'symbolic restitution of the wife that the marriage of his mother had permitted him (the uncle) to obtain'.⁷¹ A father did not usually pass on *mebian* to his own son, because the temptation to exact low payment and thereby reduce efficacy was too great. Tessmann states clearly for the Fang that knowledge could not be a 'legacy'; by the cultural logic it had to be owned by individuals and imparted to others 'in return for cash payment. This is a business deal...'.⁷²

Learning how to compose and operate a single *nkisi* was labor-intensive. Even undertaken by an expert, it could take months of work and several days of final celebration since varied elements had to be brought together.⁷³ And one had to know how to learn. Even to be 'astonished' by *minkisi*, let alone to create them, a person had to be highly educated in complex meanings and allusions and to be aware that there was knowledge that went beyond their own. The efficacy of action, for example of the hunt, would be damaged unless every participant could not only play his personalistic part but appreciate and interconnect with others. This was an 'information society' *par excellence*, but in an inclusive way quite different from the models of hierarchical gradations of esoteric knowledge as a social control mechanism. In fact, political status was not always accorded to the holders of specialist knowledge,⁷⁴ which itself suggests that knowledge may have been quite widely distributed. Leaders had to attract the holders of a knowledge they did not themselves possess. As Laburthe-Tolra writes of the Bene 'It was very important for the security of the group to be able to brag of the presence in their midst of a "man of miracles"',⁷⁵ and by extension, of access to a theoretically limitless network of sources of specialized knowledge.

As political groups expanded it was often *physical* manifestations of this complex of human knowledge – *nkobi* boxes,⁷⁶ Lemba *minkisi*⁷⁷ – rather than human repositories through which the reach of power was extended. In Equatorial Africa human knowledge could be condensed and vested in singular, named objects that became powerful in themselves.⁷⁸ *Minkisi* composition may then illustrate two cultural principles: the composition and storage of diversity that may also have had social analogs in community organization, and the equation of thing and person that allowed the storage of knowledge in things. In his work on Kongo 'medicines' and 'fetishes'

⁷⁰ Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba*, 1185, 1219, insert and emphasis added.

⁷¹ Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba*, 1185.

⁷² Tessmann, *Pangwe*, 3.

⁷³ W. MacGaffey, 'Complexity, astonishment and power: the visual vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi', *J. Southern Afr. Studies*, xiv (1988), 188–203.

⁷⁴ Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba*, 1189.

⁷⁵ Laburthe-Tolra, *Minlaaba*, 1188.

⁷⁶ J. Vansina, *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880–1892* (Oxford, 1973); N. Schrag, 'Changing perceptions of wealth among the Bamboma (Lower Zaire)' (Ms edited by Phyllis Martin, Bloomington, 1990).

⁷⁷ J. Janzen, *Lemba: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World, 1650–1930* (New York, 1982).

⁷⁸ A particular named *nkisi* is described in W. MacGaffey, 'Lulendo: the recovery of a Kongo Nkisi', *Ethnos*, LII (1987), 339–49.

MacGaffey has provided insight into Equatorial concepts of how power is concentrated in both things and people, a process for which he himself uses the term 'composition'. *Minkisi* were conglomerates of things, each component evocative of different powers which, when put together, played off one another to make allusions, create tensions and invoke spiritual complementarities that were deeply inspiring and intimidating. No academic summary can compete with the description of *minkisi* powers 'to afflict and to heal' provided by Kavuna Simon in 1915:

They receive these powers by composition, conjuring, and consecration. They are composed of earths, ashes, herbs, and leaves, and of relics of the dead. They are composed in order to relieve and benefit people, and to make a profit To look after their owners and to visit retribution on them. The way of every *nkisi* is this: when you have composed it, observe its rules lest it be annoyed and punish you. It knows no mercy.⁷⁹

These *minkisi* were then named, assumed identities and became singular sources of power in particular regions and amongst particular peoples.

In the end, then, the accumulative version of wealth-in-people, when taken to represent the entire social process, not only preserves problematic assumptions from evolutionary theory but also muddies the waters with respect to an understanding of the relationship between wealth-in-people and wealth-in-things. In Equatorial thinking knowledge could be condensed and stored in both human and material forms. Some things and some people were analogs of each other, and identified with one another; other things and other people might need the mediations of 'exchange' to transform into each other. If we take the thing/person contrast for granted, all these transformations are assimilated to one category, which then inevitably looks much more complex and paradoxical than it is.

The Social Composition of Knowledge

If cultural constructions of *things* were so clearly made up of catalytic elements, represented knowledge and emanated powers, then surely we should look for comparable social processes in communities of the knowledgeable, specialized, individuated *persons* who made and used them. No leader could succeed without powers that derived from specialist knowledge, and the ultimate leaders, the ancestors, were considered the embodiment of knowledge itself. Fernandez and Fernandez write of the Fang reliquary figures that they 'have an air of secret knowledge appropriate to the ancestors. Indeed Fang folk etymology derives their general term for carved figure, *eyema*, from the root, *yem*, to know'.⁸⁰ Indeed, no *nkisi* had efficacy without the ancestral component. In Kongo practice, the composition of a *nkisi* involved 'sojourning in the land of the dead, from whom he learned the techniques and rules of his craft'.⁸¹ MacGaffey comments further that chiefly power had similar qualities to the *minkisi* themselves: 'The similarities between chiefship and *minkisi* deserve more attention than they have

⁷⁹ W. MacGaffey, 'The eyes of understanding: Kongo *minkisi*', in National Museum of African Art, *Astonishment and Power* (Washington DC, 1993), 21.

⁸⁰ J. W. Fernandez and R. L. Fernandez, 'Fang reliquary art: its quantities and qualities', *Cah. Ét. Afr.*, xv (1975), 744.

⁸¹ MacGaffey, *Art*, 33.

received'.⁸² Consonant with the ancestral inspiration and relics of the dead that were key components of all *minkisi*, the chief's privileged contact with the dead was the focal point of his multiple powers. He aroused them by driving the point of his staff – duly strengthened by 'tokens' – into the ground (a gesture that came up prominently in *Moneblum*).

This connection between a multiplicity of powers and chiefship is the burden of Wrigley's commentary on Vansina's *Paths in the Rainforests*: 'The Equatorial concepts for leadership were not only derivative of terms for wealth acquisition and distribution as in a redistributive model, but also of the concept of honor that applied in some places to priest, diviner, magician, doctor'.⁸³ Possibly then wealth(s) and powers were not conceptually or dynamically distinct, although they may have been in some cases. They depended on one another; without the *bian akuma* (the medicine for wealth) the *nkukuma* (the rich man, leader) could not succeed as a leader. Even in the large polity of the Mangbetu the demonstration of personal knowledge was a prerequisite for leadership: 'The most important qualities of a good king (or of any leader) were personal qualities: *nataate* (the ability to be someone) and *nakira* (skill and intelligence), both of which could be demonstrated by skill at the dance'.⁸⁴ Here may be a principle of diversity, growth, hierarchies and social conformities (albeit quite fragile and perhaps ephemeral ones) that was based in a foundational concept of multiplicity, allowing for an 'endless variety of interpretations'.⁸⁵

The concept of composition is used explicitly, although not for social organizational processes, in many places in the Equatorial literature. Fernandez writes of 'compositions of the past' and uses many evocative images for this kind of process: 'the reconciliation of voices,' 'the argument of images', 'tying together', 'the suggestion of coherence, the impression of momentum'.⁸⁶ MacGaffey⁸⁷ uses the concept throughout his work on *minkisi*. The intricacy of that knowledge and compositional process *still* astonishes. Possibly the formal study of material culture could be developed to refine the sociological imagination. Consider Schoonheydt's recent finding that the 'denominations' of Katanga croisettes seem to sort fairly exactly by weight, differently from their equally systematic sorting by size, and this in a society with no exact calibrational equipment and unknown abstractions of mathematical computation.⁸⁸ Clearly there were expert producers and some sort of implicit or explicit theory of conversions and combinations of attributes that were not simply additive. Or there is Ascher's discovery of the logics of graph theory in geometric design on raffia cloth and other surfaces: 'The name of a figure depends on how it is categorized. The Bushoong view a design as composed of different elementary designs, and the name given to the figure is the name associated with its most significant constituent. Thus, designs that appear the same to a Westerner may have different names, and

⁸² MacGaffey, 'Eyes', 95–6.

⁸³ Wrigley, 'Review', 132.

⁸⁴ E. Schildkrout and C. A. Keim, *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire* (New York, 1990), 147.

⁸⁵ MacGaffey, 'Eyes', 87.

⁸⁶ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 49, 562, 565.

⁸⁷ e. g. MacGaffey, 'Complexity'.

⁸⁸ J. A. Schoonheydt, 'Les croisettes du Katanga', *Revue Belge de Numismatique*, cxxxvii (1991), 141–57. 'While the evolution of dimension is linear, the evolution of weight follows a different rule, for which we do not understand the criteria..., entering into a weight system' (p. 157).

those that appear different may have the same name'.⁸⁹ The Tshokwe example that Ascher describes links several processes that a fuller historical ethnography would describe step-by-step. Continuous line graphs are known as *sona*. There are not only principles of *sona* combination on logical grounds but also narratives that the figures allude to and whose virtuoso drawing in combination during the telling of a story 'keeps the audience in suspense, intriguing them with the arabesques'.⁹⁰ Bwiti is an extended study of the 'plenipotentiary quality'⁹¹ of combinations and sequences of religious imagery.

The centers of gravity in artistic combinations of multiplicity might provoke imagination about concomitant social processes. Were qualities produced, for example, according to a concept of 'need'? Varied skills may have been produced by partner-matching, in the kind of indigenous genetics elders in Cameroon alluded to when they described headmen's choices of particular clients (*mintobq*) as lovers for their wives, or when they referred to a man cultivating a relationship with a woman of beauty and intelligence in the hope of marrying her daughter. There were certainly socialization processes through which singular capacities in children were recognized and fostered: small ordeals and demonstrations, nicknames, recognized relationships between children and experts in the fields for which they seemed to show a talent. Individual mobility and migration may have been about recruitment of skills rather than simply escape from control and the search for a new patron. Marriage was also a means of tapping new sources of knowledge; in Southern Cameroon men of great talent were sought after as affines, even if they were severely disabled in other respects.⁹²

Gender complementarities were also part of compositional processes. Women took part in different ways within the region. The Tshokwe drawings were exclusively restricted to men, whereas some Bushong textile designs and techniques were the domain of women. Women's skirts consisted of over thirty individually embroidered pieces, contributed to by men (for the weaving) and different women of the matrilineage. The final product was 'a chart of social relations and communal artistry'; 'aesthetically, the finished textile documents the varying skills and repertoire of traditional designs at the disposal of the women who contributed to its fabrication', and a particular cloth might be associated with its principal designer.⁹³ Women in other Equatorial societies were differentiated amongst themselves according to how their own knowledge complemented the particular capacities of their husband; a particular woman could enhance or massively undermine her husband's social growth.⁹⁴ The capacity to 'grow' things that is embedded

⁸⁹ M. Ascher, *Ethnomathematics: A Multicultural View of Mathematical Ideas* (Pacific Grove, 1991), 35. ⁹⁰ Ascher, *Ethnomathematics*, 37. ⁹¹ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 564.

⁹² For example, Jean-Jacques Aba Ebanga, Mvele virtuoso performer and intellectual, referred to in Guyer, 'Iron currencies', who was given wives by admirers even though he was a severe paralytic.

⁹³ P. Darish, 'Dressing for the next life: raffia production and use among the Kuba of Zaire', in Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (eds.), *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington DC, 1989), 125, 127, 135.

⁹⁴ Koch, *Magie*, 19, describes a wife's capacity to bring luck, and Tessmann, HRAF II, 22, retells a story in which one new and beautiful wife releases the helpful souls that have enabled her husband to acquire 79 wives and a prosperous village, resulting in complete disaster.

in the name of the Bene woman's cult *mevungu*⁹⁵ possibly referred to the capacity to 'grow' others, catalytically, as well as to biological fecundity and agricultural fertility. Wherever there were gender differentiations of knowledge, these might shape the otherwise-straightforward accumulative logic of the polygynous dynamic of wealth-in-people.⁹⁶ A focus on solidarity, leadership and accumulation of people leaves us with no solid descriptions of such critically important phenomena. An example of the ultimate limitations of accumulative models can be taken from Guyer's own work on the history of Bulu-Beti-Fang bridewealth and polygyny. To find a correspondence between numbers of wives and the structures of a growing trade system goes only part of the way towards understanding the meaning and power of the 'accumulation' of wives. Ideally one would trace out – as was indicated but not taken very far – the different facets of power that each particular wife brought: links to a new territory or trade network; taps into the power of specialists amongst her kin and their personal qualities of strength or skill; control of a centrifugal home front (as in systems of preferential marriage) or pathways to the outside; access to agricultural and other productive and spiritual knowledge appropriate to different environments as groups migrated. And then there are the personal qualities of women themselves. Eton elders described one kind of marital choice in the past as involving long processes of cultivation beginning before a girl's birth, simply because of the particularly admired qualities of the mother and her kin. Beauty and giftedness were highly relevant. It was, elders said, the ugly, the lazy and the stupid who became *metut*, passed from one husband to another, mainly in repayment of debt, until they no longer could access their natal families.⁹⁷

The empirical basis may not be rich enough to reconstruct a history of these dimensions of Equatorial history with much confidence, but there is enough material to provoke thought about what a social theory of 'differentiation by knowledge' might look like. A status or market-driven 'division of labor' no longer captures the processes at work, especially in 'information societies' like Equatorial Africa in the past and perhaps others. Without comparative work one is unsure how different or similar other information societies were. For example, medical knowledge was highly differentiated in Ancient Egypt as well: 'Specialization was carried to absurd lengths... For instance, around certain Pharaohs and their court virtually every organ or sickness acquired its own specialist. One royal personage had one physician for his right eye and another for his left eye...'.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ J.-F. Vincent, *Traditions et transition: entretiens avec des femmes beti du sud Cameroun* (Paris, 1976).

⁹⁶ It may even be worth rethinking the 'natalism' that J. Iliffe and others see in African patterns of fertility in light of an emphasis on the value of personal knowledge. 'Review article: The origins of African demographic growth', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxx (1989), 165–9. It is not 'more children' in the simple numerical sense that is at issue, but more and different powers. Cultivating the value of difference may place historically changing restrictions on the natalist logic, depending on the kind of knowledge at stake and the coexistence of incentives to accumulation, in the narrowly quantitative sense.

⁹⁷ Guyer, 'Indigenous currencies'.

⁹⁸ The quotation is from E. M. Rutkow, *Surgery: An Illustrated History* (St. Louis, 1993). It appears in the review of the book by S. Nuland, 'The inside story: a chronicle of surgery, its origins and its astonishing development through the ages', *New York Times Book Review* (13 Mar. 1994), 3.

The social bases and dynamics of diversity in knowledge, and their relationship to differing regimes of power, is an agenda on the table with respect to African history. From the Equatorial case one can note (a) that the most obvious analytically amenable aspects of wealth to us – that it is implicitly ordinal, like status or honor, and that it adds up – are not its only possible qualities; but also; (b) that recognizing this may not be cause for despair or radical particularism. There may be other combinatorial logics that are *both* indigenous *and* expressible in ‘external’ logical categories. We are not necessarily in the position MacGaffey describes so pessimistically, where ‘the languages and conceptual categories in which the audience must be addressed are those of the modern university’.⁹⁹ Raphia-cloth geometrics and the riddle of the copper croisettes may be expressible in indigenous logic, which in turn challenges and extends the terms of formal analysis. *Moneblum* is largely comprehensible to an audience half a world away, even if we entirely miss the resonances of all the names. And the social processes of catalytic composition are profoundly familiar to all who have to think for a living, in collective contexts, even if the anthropological terminology for it fails. The problem is simply that the old theoretical categories of differentiation by political hierarchy or by market function that have been so productive, and continue to be powerful in many contexts, are still embedded in an evolutionary theory whose terms are simply misleadingly incomplete for Equatorial Africa and perhaps for other societies as well.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF GROWTH

We have distinguished three different dynamics of wealth-in-people: the kinship/status dynamic, the demographic dynamic and the knowledge composition dynamic. It seems to be the last that is particularly marked in the Equatorial region: knowledge as a personal attribute is an unusually prominent feature of social life, and storage of knowledge has the unusual characteristic of being in particular things as well as in persons. In a sense, of course, dependence on knowledge defines the human endeavor in general, in all systems; there has to be a sociology of knowledge of some kind. But in Equatorial Africa it was not simply an adaptive knowledge of the key accumulable resources of economic and social life – a knowledge of soil, rainfall, crops, forest, fishing and so on – but also of songs, dance and the spiritual world. Neither was it *general* knowledge, in the sense that everyone in the eligible categories of society had equal coverage of any part of it, like herding skills in a pastoral society; people specialized. But neither was it esoteric knowledge, in Meillassoux’s sense, jealously guarded and accessible only through status attributes; people sold it to others. Equatorial knowledge was a primary resource that was elaborated, differentiated and cultivated far beyond levels that can be explained by the mundane adaptive need to exploit land, labor, capital or any other material or social resource. If we push this insight further and treat knowledge as a key ‘resource’, a ‘means of production’, then its modes of aggregation and elaboration become socially and historically critical.

⁹⁹ W. MacGaffey, ‘Epistemological ethnocentrism in African studies’, in B. Jewsiewicki and D. Newbury (eds.), *African Historiographies: What History For Which Africa?* (Beverly Hills, 1986), 48.

The plausibility and the vagueness of the wealth-in-people model rests on its conflation of the accumulation of more elements and the composition of different elements. The former perspective affords a view of demographic and political dynamics of accumulation by natalism, polygyny, servitude and clientship; the latter affords a view of networks and collectivities of shifting shape and spatial reach. The former dynamic is implicitly structured by principles of control; the latter has the fluid, even anarchic, qualities attendant on temporary and conjunctural access. Both are relevant to Equatorial history, although we argue for the great importance of the compositional model. It corresponds to the ethnography on a wide range of topics, and its neglect in social theory may correspond to its relative decline as an organizational principle in the colonial period. Kinship and kingship survived the disorder and demographic collapse of colonial rule that may have eliminated enough of the wealth that was 'people' to profoundly impoverish the compositional process.

Vansina designates the 1920s as marking the 'Death of a Tradition',¹⁰⁰ because people lost control of the reproduction of their own societies. But what exactly did die, since kinship structures continued to operate and demographic growth revived after the mid-century? We argue that it was the complement of knowledge that took such a heavy toll. Indigenous sources convey a tragic sense that relevant knowledge became inaccessible: 'Black-man... was left without vital information... as the story tellers usually concluded, unable to discover anything and unable to complete anything...'. This is the only region of Africa, to our knowledge, where the term for Europeans referred to intellectual characteristics rather than physical ones: the people who count and recount. 'The European... was first of all the "knowledgeable one"'.¹⁰¹ Composition of differentiated knowledge in a non-literate society must be a fragile and delicate process under the best of circumstances; social life has to be reconfigured after each gain or loss, and probably there have been far more loss and reconfiguration than we can begin to comprehend from the present vantage point. Demographic collapse of the kind known to have taken place in several parts of Equatorial Africa in the early colonial period¹⁰² must entail a catastrophic loss of wealth for societies where knowledge is a key resource, possibly undermining social reproduction itself. Grief and despair are not only about the loss of numbers or persons but about the rendering inoperable of entire processes of social complementarity. Kinship may then be not what continues *ab initio*, the *sui generis* basis of all modes of order in segmentary societies, but rather 'what is left' in the organizational repertoire, blown out of proportion by default. It hardly seems coincidental that Equatorial Africa has been the cradle of at least three major regional cults – Lemba, Kimbanguism and Bwiti – and has produced some of the most spectacular conversions and the most profound philosophical responses to them.

The theme can be extended, however, beyond this clarification of the dual

¹⁰⁰ Vansina, *Paths*, 239.

¹⁰¹ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 70.

¹⁰² See G. Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique Noire : dynamique sociale en Afrique centrale* (Paris, 1955); M-C. Dupré, 'Une catastrophe démographique au Moyen Congo: la guerre de l'impôt chez les Teke Tsayi, 1913-1920', *History in Africa*, xvii (1990), 59-76. M. Lyons, *The Colonial Disease : Sleeping Sickness in the Early Colonial Belgian Congo* (Cambridge, 1993).

meaning of wealth-in-people and renewed attention to the implications of colonial conditions for model-building. There are implications of wealth-in-knowledge for pre-colonial history. People/thing conversions were literally possible in the sphere of knowledge, and knowledge was alienable through capture and sale.¹⁰³ This cultural configuration means that there must have been considerable fluidity between wealth-in-people and wealth-in-things under the changing historical circumstances of regional relations and international trade. They might be converted easily into one another, be complementary and grow together, or they might be thought in tension. Examples illustrate all situations. *Kumu* as material wealth and *kumu* as honor may be, as Wrigley argues, an 'original' conceptual conjunction.¹⁰⁴ In a cultural context where knowledge was convertible from thing-ness to people-ness, one can see that the two emphases might become versions of each other or part company into conceptual opposition. M.-C. Dupré, for example, suggests that among the Teke there was a permanent structural *confrontation* of principles and balance of powers between wealth and wisdom.¹⁰⁵ Fernandez writes that there was also a sense of *opposition* between things and people among the Fang, but by contrast to the Teke, they thought of the *nkukuma* (person of wealth) as arising 'after the coming of the Whiteman' which gave rise to '*newly perceived* differences between wealth and know-how'.¹⁰⁶ Moneblum, however, tends to suggest that the *nkukuma* had differential access to both knowledge and wealth, although in both cases by the mobilization of intermediaries rather than by direct control. In other words, the two qualities could *change relationship* to each other over time and space fairly easily, because of the pathway between people and things that the Equatorial concept of knowledge constituted. People and things were not the same, but they could both house knowledge. The morality of people/thing conversions and pathways may then have been quite different in Equatorial Africa than in other systems with different concepts of the sites in which knowledge can be stored.

In relation to a *possible social history* as distinct from a *necessary theoretical elaboration*, a notion of wealth-in-people as wealth-in-knowledge poses the question of what Equatorial societies did with uniformity. We know of assortment bargaining, but a great deal of the imports in the slave and legitimate trades came in as uniform manufactured goods in large lots: copper *mitakos*, cloth, guns and so on. It may have been such unusual uniformity that set strictly accumulative modes in motion, that is, the immobilization of large amounts of material goods by those in power. Uniformity of wealth can breach the conditions for compositional access because it allows otherwise-impossible levels of control over the transactions that make up exchange and collaboration. The accumulation of 'patrimonies' that Vansina accords great historical importance may have been a concomitant of uniformity, either produced within systems by diligent effort or resulting from the surges of fairly standardized goods that flooded in from

¹⁰³ For a general discussion of alienation in non-capitalist economies, see C. A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (New York, 1982). ¹⁰⁴ Wrigley, 'Review', 133.

¹⁰⁵ M.-C. Dupré, 'Raphia monies among the Teke: their origin and control', in J. I. Guyer (ed.), *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities* (Portsmouth NH), 39-52.

¹⁰⁶ Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 69, emphasis added.

Europe. Slower and varied production and circulation may have favored the cultivation of diversity and proliferation.¹⁰⁷ But perhaps also there were techniques – from naming to marking and reworking – to differentiate uniform imported goods that were acquired through trade. *Moneblum* refers to a named gun, and an article by Georges Dupré¹⁰⁸ describes an imported currency piece that seems to have been deliberately and systematically altered by local artisans, for reasons that remain obscure. The quality we refer to as ‘diversity’ seems pervasive, supported by an ontology and a politics for which the shape of knowledge was fundamental.

In the end, the challenge for scholarship is not only one of remaking the old models in order to bring theoretical work more in line with the richness of the ethnography and social history. The Equatorial ethnography also affords an opportunity to re-think differentiation in general and to address the historical originalities – vast strengths and great vulnerabilities – of wealth-in-people systems as they changed over time.

SUMMARY

The paper re-examines principles of social organization in pre-colonial Equatorial Africa, suggesting that the imagery of ‘accumulation’ of ‘wealth in people’ is not wrong, but not flexible enough to encompass the centrality of knowledge in these societies. People were singularized repositories of a differentiated and expanding repertoire of knowledge, as well as being structured kin (as in the kinship model) and generic dependents and followers (as in the wealth-in-people model). We argue that social mobilization was in part based on the mobilization of different bodies of knowledge, and leadership was the capacity to bring them together effectively, even if for a short time and specific purpose. We refer to this process as composition and distinguish it from accumulation.

The paper has three parts. The first substitutes an oral epic from southern Cameroon for an ethnography of the principles by which people pursued agendas and mobilized followings in their own political worlds. Colonial rule may have institutionalized pre-colonial political hierarchies, but it completely altered the terms for political mobilization. Hence the historical record is very limited for making inferences about how ‘wealth-in-people’ operated in action, under pre-colonial conditions. The second critiques the evolutionary assumptions about simple societies that still color the models of Equatorial societies. The third revisits the ethnography to illuminate the principles of composition. The conclusion makes inferences and suggestions with respect to aspects of pre-colonial social history.

¹⁰⁷ The changing nature and meaning of these patrimonies become key issues, if we follow Vansina’s argument that they run through the entire social history of Equatorial Africa. See J. I. Guyer, Review of Vansina, *Paths, Ethnohistory*, xxix (1992), 510–12.

¹⁰⁸ G. Dupré, ‘The history and adventures of a monetary object of the Kwele of the Congo: mezong, mondjos and mandjong’, in Guyer (ed.), *Money Matters*, 77–96.