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Sónia Silva

REMARKS ON
SIMILARITY IN RITUAL
CLASSIFICATION:
AFFLICTION,
DIVINATION, AND
OBJECT ANIMATION

In *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, when comparing the variety of fire festivals in Europe to many different human faces, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, "one would like to draw lines joining the parts that various faces have in common."¹ In *Philosophical Investigations*, speaking now of games—card games, board games, ball games, and so on—Wittgenstein says, "if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*" but "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."² In the similarities among different games he sees "family resemblances." In the act of tracing similarities he defines his method.

I propose to employ Wittgenstein's method in the study of three rituals from northwest Zambia, where I have conducted two years of ethnographic fieldwork since the mid-1990s. Because the Luvale, Chokwe, Mbunda, Luchazi, and Lunda who live in the region are culturally and historically related to the Ndembu, the ethnic group whose social and ritual life Victor Turner studied in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) in the 1950s, readers will be rather familiar with those three rituals as well as the concepts that I employ

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über Frazers "Golden Bough"/Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough"*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. A. C. Myles (Retford: Brynmill, 1979), 13e.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 31e, 32e.

to designate them: affliction, divination, and object animation.³ Some degree of familiarity with Turner's ethnography is important. I believe, as Wittgenstein does, that new insights emerge from the process of rearranging materials, the placing side by side, and the comparing of what we already (more or less) know. Wittgenstein refers to this "arranging [of] the factual material so that we can easily pass from one part to another and have a clear view of it" as a "perspicuous presentation." To describe perspicuously, he tells us, is to make possible "that understanding which consists just in the fact that we 'see the connections.'"⁴

Undoubtedly, there are important differences among affliction rituals, divination rituals, and object animation rituals, differences that the concepts of affliction, divination, and object animation capture to some degree. At the same time, however, there are also striking similarities among those rituals, and it is these similarities that I wish to disclose in the process of revealing connections.⁵ In this article, following the descriptive method of Wittgenstein, I draw the lines joining some of the features that these three rituals have in common, hoping to reveal their "complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."⁶ Although rituals of affliction, divination, and object animation are not identical, they are, like human faces, variously similar. This is because similarity is not sameness. Unlike sameness, similarity entails difference, a relationship that the *American Heritage Dictionary* online brings forward in its definition of similar: "having a resemblance in appearance or nature; alike though not identical."

³ See Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957), *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), and *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

⁴ Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, 8e-9e. For a discussion of Wittgenstein's descriptive methodology and his opposition of description to explanation, see Nir Ben-Moshe, "On Wittgenstein's Notion of a Perspicuous Representation: Freud, Frazer, Art and Rule-Following" (paper presented at the 2012 conference of the Society for the Study of the History of Analytical Philosophy, Hamilton, Canada, 2012).

⁵ Victor Turner is among the innumerable scholars who have noted interconnections among rituals. In "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual" (in *Forest of Symbols*, 31), Turner speaks of dominant symbols, arguing that "the meaning-content of certain dominant-symbols possesses a high degree of constancy and consistency throughout the total symbolic system."

⁶ On the idea of family resemblances in the study of ritual and religion, see William P. Alston, "Religion," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and Free, 1967), 140-45; Robert McDermott, "The Religion Game: Some Family Resemblances," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38, no. 4 (1970): 390-400; Rodney Needham, "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences," *Man* 10, no. 3 (1975): 349-69, and "Remarks on Wittgenstein and Ritual," in *Exemplars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 149-77; and Fitz John Porter Poole, "Metaphors and Maps: Towards Comparison in the Anthropology of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1986): 411-57.

Three insights emerge from the activity of describing Zambian rituals perspicuously. The first insight, hovering close to the Zambian ethnography but of broader comparative interest, may be phrased thus: the concepts of affliction, divination, and object animation are best perceived not as different *rituals*, as our old typologies would have it, but as *thematic threads*. (As will be explained later, the dominant thematic thread in object animation rituals is best described as “initiation.”) Interwoven with one another in different configurations, these threads appear and reappear in various forms and different media throughout the ritual landscape of northwest Zambia as well as the adjacent regions of northeast Angola and southwest Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the southern fringes of Central Africa, the threads of affliction, divination, and initiation inform the language in which rituals are spoken, designated, and classified. They also shape the acts, movements, gestures, substances, objects, bodies, and sounds that give rituals form—the fibers, to use yet another analogy dear to Wittgenstein, with which the threads of ritual are woven.

To phrase this differently, the recognition of similarities among different rituals throws into question the pervasive tendency to equate descriptive ritual categories to types of ritual and ritual events. Notwithstanding the value and validity of that tendency—the processes of affliction, divination, and object animation are dominant in the rituals thus named—the method of family resemblances reveals that ritual categories are not conterminous with ritual events. To equate ritual categories with ritual events is to homogenize those events, to take the part for the whole. To reduce each ritual event to its dominant thread and action—say, reducing a divination ritual to the literal act of divining—is equally limiting, or at least as limiting as reducing a human face to a smile.

My second insight pertains to classification theory. It turns out that the tracing of lines joining different rituals challenges the classical monothetic principle of classification that underlies such denominators as affliction, divination, and object animation. According to the classical, Aristotelian system of classification, all members of a given class share one or more defining features or discrete characteristics, and each characteristic is held by every member. These two criteria are the hallmark of monothetic taxonomies. Family resemblances, by contrast, define networks of crisscrossing similarities, being in closer agreement with the system of polythetic classification first devised by biologists in the early twentieth century. In a polythetic class, members do not always share one or more concrete characteristics, and these characteristics are not always held by all the members of that class, as is the case with monothetic classes.⁷

⁷ On monothetic and polythetic classification, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press,

This insight is not novel. Several scholars of ritual and religion note the convergence between the philosophical idea of family resemblances and the polythetic principle of classification. Ronald Grimes speaks of “modes of ritual sensibility” that “fade into one another at the seams,” rather than ritual types, and of “qualities of ritual” and “family characteristics.” Drawing more directly and explicitly on modern classification theory, anthropologist Rodney Needham effectively demonstrates that ritual is a polythetic concept. “As a polythetic concept,” he argues, “‘ritual’ variously combines certain characteristic features, and the task of the comparativist is to identify these features and to register the patterns into which they combine.” Speaking now of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith makes a similar point. True to his commitment to the biological model of polythesis, which he sees as irreconcilable with the philosophical model of family resemblances, Smith speaks not of family resemblances or games or ropes but of maps of characteristics.⁸

It should be noted that these authors situate their polythetic efforts in the intracategorical space of analysis—“ritual,” in the case of Grimes and Needham, and “religion” (as well as the subordinate taxon “Judaism”), in the case of Smith. Their choice of analytical space is important because they wish to break the monolithic effect of monothetic classification by disclosing differences within each class. With reference to Judaism, Smith argues that recognizing the variety of Judaisms within Judaism is to write against essentialist social discourses.⁹ Carrying Smith’s idea one step further in a thought-provoking article on the Lubavitch Hasidim (a community of orthodox Jews living in New York City), Henry Goldschmidt argues that bringing out the existing differences within the reductionist category of Judaism is a way to

1996); Needham, “Polythetic Classification,” and “Remarks on Wittgenstein and Ritual”; Poole, “Metaphors and Maps”; Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Jonathan Z. Smith, “Introduction,” and “Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism,” both in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982a), xi–xiii, and 1–18, respectively, “Classification,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 35–44, “A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion,” and “Religion, Religions, Religious,” both in *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 160–78 and 179–196, respectively; Jan A. M. Snoek, “Defining ‘Rituals,’” in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 3–14; and Martin Southwold, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion,” *Man* 13 (1978): 362–79. For a historiographic description of the shift from monothetic to polythetic classification, not only in anthropology and ritual and religious studies but also, earlier, in biology, see Needham, “Polythetic Classification”; and Smith, “Introduction”.

⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), 35–51, “Research in Ritual Studies: A Programmatic Essay,” in *Research in Ritual Studies: A Programmatic Essay and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1985), and *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Waterloo: Ritual Studies International, 2010); Needham, “Remarks on Wittgenstein and Ritual”; and Smith, “Introduction,” 136 n. 15, and “Fences and Neighbors,” 18.

⁹ Smith, “Fences and Neighbors,” 18.

interrogate and deconstruct central categories of modern social science from a poststructuralist perspective. In doing so, he reveals the biases and historicity of those categories, and develops what he calls a form of "social antireductionism."¹⁰

It is possible, however, to write against reductionism from a different perspective, further contributing to the polythetic turn in ritual and religious studies. This perspective leads to my third insight. With Smith, I move my analysis from the heights of metacategories to subordinate taxa, he to Judaism and I to the lower-level categories of affliction, divination, and object animation. Unlike Smith and other authors, however, I do not circumscribe my analysis to the intracategorical space but move back and forth among adjacent categories. In other words, where these authors disclose differences within, I reveal similarities across.

It is from this intercategorical perspective that it becomes possible, as mentioned, to redefine the categories of affliction, object animation, and divination as thematic threads that recur in different rituals, combining in a different configuration in each case and turning the rituals in which they recur into spaces of heterogeneity. Rituals, Wittgenstein reminds us, "are *related* to one another in many different ways."¹¹ The recognition of similarities across differences has the same effect as the recognition of differences within similarity—the undoing of essentialism.

In the programmatic essay that accompanies his *summa tipologica*, Grimes states that the main objective underlying his "raggedly justified categories is to initiate serious and sustained analysis of those categories."¹² Taking up his invitation, I now offer three descriptive portraits of ritual life in northwest

¹⁰ Henry Goldschmidt, "Religion, Reductionism, and the Godly Soul: Lubavitch Hasidic Jewishness and the Limits of Classificatory Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (2009): 547–72. See also Chidester, *Savage Systems*, 259–60; and Michael Satlow, "Defining Judaism: Accounting for 'Religions' in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2006): 837–60.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 31c.

¹² Ronald L. Grimes, "Research in Ritual Studies," 4, and "Ritual," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 259–70. On ritual classification, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1915); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1957); Grimes, "Research in Ritual Studies"; D. Handelman, "Conceptual Alternatives to 'Ritual,'" in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 37–50; Lauri Honko, "Theories Concerning the Ritual Process," in *Science of Religion, Studies in Methodology*, ed. Lauri Honko (Paris: Mouton & Hague, 1979), 369–90; Needham, "Polythetic Classification," and "Remarks on Wittgenstein and Ritual"; Jens Peter Schjødt, "Initiation and the Classification of Rituals," *Temenos* 22 (1986): 93–108; Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity*, and *Forest of Symbols*; Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1909; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); and A. F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966).

Zambia and south Central Africa more broadly. To create these portraits, I draw on the three familiar concepts of affliction, object animation, and divination as well as the method that Wittgenstein devised in the 1930s: tracing lines joining the features that different rituals have in common, particularly, in the case of northwest Zambian rituals, those features that pertain to overall structure, constitutive elements, and ontology. I hope that my tripartite presentation will be a perspicuous one in which I reveal my approach to ritual action and “draw attention to the similarity, the connection, between the facts.”¹³

AFFLICTION

Because the ultimate purpose of affliction, object animation, and basket divination is to divine, northwest Zambians often associate the entire ritual complex defined by these three rituals with the reputable technique of basket divination. This is a technique in which the diviner, always a man, shakes a coiled basket filled with thirty or so symbolic articles, from wooden carvings and metallic bracelets to animals claws and tree seeds. Basket divination is practiced in the vast three-corner region where Zambia, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo share borders. The performance of affliction rituals, however, extends far beyond this region, covering the entire expanse of Central and Southern Africa.¹⁴

Affliction, object animation, and basket divination are also associated with a particular ancestral manifestation known, in the Luvale language, as Kayongo. (Hereafter, all vernacular terms are written in Luvale, the predominant language spoken in Chavuma, the district of northwest Zambia where I do research.) Ancestral manifestations are the prototypical spiritual forms that known and named ancestors take on when, as punitive agents, they intervene in the affairs of the living. Although ancestral manifestations are collectively known as *mahamba*, it is possible to distinguish them by gender, proper name, and personality traits. Kayongo, the *lihamba* (singular of *mahamba*) associated with basket divination, is described as male, powerful, ruthless, and exceedingly cruel. On occasion, Kayongo will afflict a living descendant who has forgotten a known ancestor in his or her heart or quarreled with relatives and spat out insults in disrespect of shared values and social rules. More typically, though, basket divination being a male profession, Kayongo will afflict one of his male descendants to ensure the continuity of this old, honorable profession. At the mercy of Kayongo, the afflicted man will be left to choose

¹³ Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, 9e.

¹⁴ John M. Janzen, *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

between a future as a basket diviner and an agonizing death with sharp headaches, stabbing pains in the chest, and mounting stretches of lunacy.¹⁵

What then is a Kayongo affliction ritual? I never attended one of these rarely performed rituals during my extended fieldwork in the border district of Chavuma, but from conversations with ritual experts as well as laymen, it became clear that the main purpose of this affliction ritual is to heal a man caught by a punitive ancestor manifested as Kayongo and, in the process, to initiate that man to the profession of basket divination.¹⁶ This is a typical affliction ritual, as Turner defined it in his first, oft-quoted ethnography, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*: “Cults of affliction are performed for individuals who are said by Ndembu to have been ‘caught’ (*ku-kwata*) by the spirits of deceased relatives. . . . Being ‘caught’ means to be afflicted with bad luck at hunting in the case of men, with reproductive disorders in the case women, and with illness in both cases.”¹⁷

Now, an affliction ritual performed to heal a man caught by Kayongo exhibits the typical tripartite structure of rituals of affliction that Turner also identified:¹⁸ the first part consists of a nightlong event during which Kayongo possesses the sick man in the form of a trance (*kutunguta*, or trembling) in order to cure him. The second part is a period of relative seclusion during which the afflicted man remains under the strictures of ritual prescriptions and proscriptions. The third and last part consists of a nightlong event during which Kayongo emerges once again in order to empower the afflicted man and animate his oracle. Although, in all three parts, both the diviner-to-be and the ritual officiant are set apart in the sense that they have crossed a spatial and existential threshold and are now burdened with the obligations, exigencies, and travails of ritual, only the nightlong events that constitute the first and third parts of an affliction ritual share the same designation as *vilika*.

In both *vilika*, a large bonfire is lit in the village plaza. Women and children sit on mats on one side, and men sit on stools and chairs on the other side,

¹⁵ Sónia Silva, “Reification and Fetishism: Processes of Transformation,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 30, no. 1 (2013): 86–88, and *Along an African Border: Angolan Refugees and Their Divination Baskets* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 52–53.

¹⁶ In *Revelation and Divination*, Turner provides a detailed description of a Kayongo affliction ritual as described to him by his main informant, Muchona (247–67). Other authors, such as Bastin, de Boeck and Devisch, and Rodrigues de Areia offer important, if more decontextualized and fragmentary details. See Marie-Louise Bastin, “A propos du panier divinatoire tshokwe,” *Arts d’Afrique Noire* 68 (1988): 22–25; Filip de Boeck and René Devisch, “Ndembu, Luunda and Yaka Divination Compared: From Representation and Social Engineering to Embodiment and Worldmaking,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24, no. 2 (1994): 113–15; and Manuel L. Rodrigues de Areia, *Les symboles divinatoires: Analyse socio-culturelle d’une technique de divination des cokwe de l’Angola (ngombo ya cisuka)* (Coimbra: Centro de Estudos Africanos, Universidade de Coimbra, 1985), 81–7.

¹⁷ Turner, *Schism and Continuity*, 292.

¹⁸ Turner, *Drums of Affliction*.

near the drums. Because the drumming and singing fills both nights, people may refer to each *chilika* (singular of *vilika*) as *ngoma*, meaning “drum” (hence Turner’s coinage “drums of affliction”), or otherwise use the expression *chilika chakumwimbilila*, “the ritual to sing for him (the sick man).” It is also common to hear people refer to each nightlong performance as *chilika chaKayongo* (Kayongo’s ritual) or, more simply, *Kayongo*.

To the sound of drumming and singing, the senior diviner acting as the ritual officiant employs a short grass broom to frequently splash medicated water on the afflicted man, who remains seated on a special grass ring by the large bonfire, his back turned to the tall drums. In the final *chilika*, this man and his new divining basket are sung to and thoroughly splashed all through the night. In this way, I was told in Chavuma, the ritual participants attempt to persuade Kayongo to come out by possessing the afflicted man (in the form of trance) and his new basket (in the form of animation).

The two nightlong events are also densely textured with red and white symbols. In the form of white clay and the sunrise, whiteness is associated with health, amity, and clairvoyance. Red is the color of ambivalence and potency, this being the reason why the eyelids of the diviner-to-be are marked with red clay, and the material contents of the new divining basket are rubbed with the blood of a sacrificed rooster and he-goat. Mighty and cruel, Kayongo is associated with the red color.¹⁹

Affliction, then, is a dominant thematic thread in this tripartite ritual that I have chosen to designate, borrowing from Turner, an “affliction ritual.” This ritual is performed to heal a man afflicted by a punitive ancestor manifested as Kayongo, and, in order to cure that man, Kayongo must be pleased and enticed with drumming, singing, and splashing. In local understanding, this ritual is a “healing ritual” in at least two related senses: it is performed in order to cure a sick man who has been caught by a known ancestor, and it provides a setting in which that cure becomes possible by “treating” (*kuka*) the patient with splashing, singing, and drumming. Nevertheless, with Turner, I believe that the designation of affliction has the added advantage of being semantically broader than “healing,” bringing together within the same conceptual fold three key dimensions: ontology, etiology, and ritual action. Here then are the multiple, overlapping forms and different media in which the thread of affliction appears in this ritual: in ontological form as a punitive ancestral manifestation as well as the human bodies and material objects that Kayongo catches and possesses; in etiological form as a diseased human body; and in the form of ritual action, as singing, drumming, and splashing.

Affliction rituals, however, are not monothematic. Although affliction is their dominant thread, it is not the only one. In Kayongo affliction rituals, the

¹⁹ Silva, *Along an African Border*, 68–9, 79–81.

thematic thread of affliction is interwoven with other thematic threads, threads that recur in different combinations in divination and object animation rituals, sometimes monothetically, sometimes polythetically.

In addition to affliction, I see two other important threads in Kayongo affliction rituals. One is the thread of divination. As mentioned, the last part of the tripartite ritual process that defines an affliction ritual consists of a night-long event, one in which the main focus of ritual action is not the diviner alone but the diviner and his divination basket. In the morning following the night of drumming, singing, and splashing (here, again, I am relying on verbal accounts collected in Chavuma), the afflicted man is escorted to a place in the nearby forest where the ritual officiant has secretly built a crocodile-shaped earth mound and hidden a handful of small objects in the crocodile's body. This place is known as *hungu*, after a small pit dug beside the crocodile-shaped mound. There, at the *hungu*, to the sound of drumming, the afflicted man is asked to divine where the hidden objects are located and dig them out. Later that day, back in the village plaza, he is asked to shake his basket once again and divine the location of several hidden objects, maybe a bracelet, a coin, or a knife. If he succeeds, the women will trill. The ritual officiant will exclaim, "Yes, this man is a real diviner!" All the ritual participants rejoice, because they know that divining effectively in the context of an affliction ritual is a public sign that another man caught by Kayongo has become a diviner and that another coiled basket has become an oracle. Divining is an integral part of the Kayongo affliction ritual. As for the thread of divination, it becomes expressed in both material and verbal forms: in the verbal form of the divinatory speech and in the material form of the oracle and all the hidden objects divined and located both in the forest and in the village.

Confirming that thematic threads configure ritual life in northwest Zambia, and maybe elsewhere, it is also possible to identify another thread that Kayongo affliction rituals have in common with other rituals outside the sphere of affliction rituals proper (*mahamba* rituals)—the thread of initiation. As Turner notes for the Ndembu, rituals of affliction are also rituals of initiation into the healing profession, for, once healed, the afflicted individuals become healers.²⁰ Healing is experienced as an initiation. Note that the process of being initiated into ritual expertise is not perceived as a fainter expression of initiation into adulthood, *initiation* being identified as a "life-crisis ritual" in Turner's classification.²¹ We should not let the fact that the initiation thread is dominant in initiation rituals prevent us from noting the perspective of northwest Zambians. For them, the thread of initiation recurs in both affliction and

²⁰ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 293.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 292.

initiation rituals. It is there to be sure, and it becomes expressed, in both cases, in the form of a culturally framed, deeply transformative personal experience.

OBJECT ANIMATION

Let us now turn to object animation, another type of Kayongo ritual only rarely performed. An affliction ritual, as mentioned, is performed when a man falls ill at the hands of an ancestor. Analogously, an object animation ritual is performed when a divination basket shows signs of old age and disrepair, causing the symbolic articles to fall off the basket during divining. Because replacing an old divination basket is costly and laborious, diviners will cope with their malfunctioning baskets for a long time, stitching large tears and attaching leather patches as required. They become remarkably dexterous at alternating each basket shake with the swift collecting of fallen articles with their right hand. But their baskets inevitably continue to fall apart, and sooner or later diviners must take action: they will commission a new basket from an old, postmenopausal woman who knows how to coil divination baskets. They will also identify a senior diviner who is willing to serve as the main officiant in the nightlong ritual that will transform their coiled basket (*mbango*) into a divination basket (*lipele*).

Notoriously, prior to *Along an African Border*,²² this object animation ritual had never been documented. In addition to the fact that this ritual is only rarely performed, the longtime disinterest in material religion among scholars is likely to explain their glaring omission. *Lipele* animation is a complex, arduous ritual in which the main subject is a material object rather than a person, and in which the main purpose is nothing less than to animate—even personify—that object.

The purpose of this ritual is clearly reflected in the descriptive expressions that Luvala speakers employ to designate it. An object animation ritual is said to be a ritual for “bringing strength” (*kunehesa ngolo*) to the coiled basket, “filling the oracle” (*kulongesa ngombo*), and “transferring the symbolic articles from the old, decrepit basket to the new basket” (*kulungulwisa ngombo*).

Admittedly, I can think of at least two ways in which an object animation ritual differs from an affliction ritual: an object animation ritual is significantly shorter than a typical Kayongo affliction ritual, consisting, in my experience, of only one nightlong event that lasts from evening to noon. In addition, the practicing diviner whose basket is being animated is not sick; neither is he any longer an initiate to the profession of basket divination. Notwithstanding these differences, however, affliction rituals and object animation

²² Silva, *Along an African Border*, 59–81.

rituals resemble one another in several regards. At the level of ritual action, although the practicing diviner whose basket is being animated is not sick, he and his basket are, all the same, thoroughly and repeatedly “treated” with splashing, singing, and drumming throughout the night. Not surprisingly, the same people who in one situation distinguish affliction and object animation rituals in terms of intended purpose will, in another context, designate both rituals by the same name or descriptive expression: “drum” (*ngoma*) and “ritual to sing for him” (*chilika chakumwimbilila*). I was told in Chavuma that object animation rituals are simply shorter versions of the affliction rituals that turn men into diviners. Object animation rituals are reenactments of the second nightlong event (*chilika*) of the original affliction rituals.

These commonalities of movements, actions, sounds, substances, objects, and bodies lead us back to the ontological dimension. As happens with the original rituals of affliction, object animation rituals are understood as an orchestrated attempt to persuade Kayongo to emerge among the living by possessing the diviner in the form of trance and animating the basket. Kayongo, a spiritual entity, becomes manifested in the form of an objectified person and an animated object. An object animation ritual is an affliction ritual, a Kayongo ritual, a red ritual, or even a healing ritual, despite the fact that the diviner is not sick.

There is yet another commonality between the two rituals under consideration: the thread of initiation. We have seen that Kayongo affliction rituals are initiation rituals that effectively initiate selected men into the divinatory profession. Similarly, object animation is perceived as an initiation by means of which a thing becomes a person, a mere basket becomes an oracle, and a youngling becomes an adult.

But the thread of initiation appears in object animation rituals in other ways. In the object animation ritual that I attended in 1996, linking this ritual to the boys initiation ceremony, or *mukanda*, the thread of initiation took two forms: one was Ngungu, a spectacular male ancestral manifestation associated with *mukanda*, who is said to often come out in Kayongo rituals on hearing the beautiful drumming and singing. Ngungu took possession of the junior diviner’s body, making him hop high with his legs clutched onto a small stool and dart off to the surrounding bush. In addition to this ontological expression in the form of a human body in trance, the initiation thread also appeared in the biographical and professional form of ritual expertise. It turned out that the two basket diviners who were in attendance that night (the senior diviner conducting the ceremony and the more junior diviner whose basket became animated) were renowned *vakafunda*, the title given to the male ritual experts whose responsibility it is to draw on the power of ancestors and the potency of the *funda*—a tiny calabash bowl containing potent substances—to protect the initiates.

It is noteworthy that *vakafunda* join their profession after having been afflicted by a powerful ancestral manifestation, in their case, Ngungu or Kazanga. This is important because it confirms the general idea that rituals in northwest Zambia, and south Central Africa more broadly, are interwoven with the same thematic threads. On one side, the initiation thread is present in object animation rituals. On the other side, the thread of affliction is present in male initiation rituals.

Thus far, the tracing of lines conjoining similarities has led me to see affliction and initiation in object animation, challenging the general tendency to associate object animation with material religion, affliction with disease, and initiation with the transition into puberty or adulthood in the life course of humans. In scholarly discourse, though, "initiation" continues to be a term typically reserved for people, being the primary example of what Turner calls a "life-crisis ritual," a ritual performed at key biological and social thresholds of the human life course, such as birth, puberty, and death.²³ Aware of this tendency, I opted for the descriptor "object animation" instead of "initiation," creating an unfortunate, if unavoidable, disjuncture in my own argument between ritual and thematic thread. But let us not forget the lesson to be learned from the ethnography: that initiation can take place in rituals where the novice is a material object rather than a human being; and that affliction rituals can be performed in cases where there is no illness.

In addition to affliction and initiation, there is yet a third thematic thread in object animation rituals—divination. Because the diviner who commissions a ritual to empower and animate his newly woven basket is no longer a novice, as mentioned, he is not expected to prove his divining abilities at the *hungu* arena hidden in the forest and in the village plaza, as it took place in his original Kayongo affliction ritual. In object animation rituals, it is the ritual officiant's responsibility to shake the new basket for the first time in the public space of the village. In a nutshell, the thread of divination takes on two main forms during an object animation ritual: the materiality of the divination basket and the bodily movements of the ritual officiant as he shakes the new oracle in public for the first time.

I had the opportunity to see and photograph this crucial moment in 1996. In the image, senior diviner Sangombe shakes the newly animated basket of diviner Sakutemba in public (fig. 1). "The new *lipele* feels good and heavy," Sangombe announced. The new *lipele* had been thoroughly rubbed and thickened with empowering substances, and it was now ready for divining.²⁴

²³ Turner, *Schism and Continuity*, 292.

²⁴ Silva, *Along an African Border*, 72.

FIG. 1.—Diviner Sangombe shaking the new *liplele* for the first time, Chavuma, 1996 (photo by author).

DIVINATION

I now wish to turn to the *séances*, a type of ritual in which the theme of divination becomes dominant. Because *séances* are conducted to divine cases of death, disease, and other misfortunes, of which there is never a shortage, they are more frequently performed than affliction and object animation rituals.²⁵ Earlier in the twentieth century, particularly in the case of death, diviners and their apprentices would intersperse their divining with bursts of singing and dancing to the sound of tall drums and a small *lupembe* xylophone, their bodies painted, like their divination baskets, with stripes of red and white.²⁶ Today, *séances* are smaller and more subdued, though they have not lost their efficacy and complexity. In Chavuma, most *séances* take place in the village plaza during daytime. All participants sit in a circle in the shade of a tree, the diviner on

²⁵ I myself had the opportunity to attend a number of *séances* in Chavuma, and so had other scholars in their places of fieldwork or the places they visited. Key sources on basket divination include Marie-Louise Bastin, "Ngombo: Notes sur des instruments de divination employés dans le District de la Lunda en Angola," *Congo-Tervuren* 5, no. 4 (1959): 100–106, and "A propos du panier divinatoire"; de Boeck and Devisch, "Ndembu, Luunda and Yaka Divination Compared;" Manuel Jordán, "Tossing Life in a Basket: Art and Divination among Chokwe, Lunda, Luvale and Related Peoples of Northwestern Zambia" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1996); Manuel L. Rodrigues de Areia, "Le Panier divinatoire des tshokwe," *Arts d'Afrique Noire* 26 (1978): 30–47, and *Les symboles divinatoires*; Silva, *Along an African Border*; and Turner *Revelation and Divination*.

²⁶ Hermann Baumann, *Lunda: Bei Bauern und Jägern in Inner-Angola* (Berlin: Würfel, 1935), 233.

one side and the consulting party, typically smaller than in the past, on the other side facing the diviner. Holding his *lilele* basket with both hands, the diviner poses questions to it as he would to a person. Why have they come here? Is the subject of divination dead or alive? If not dead, is that person sick from the ancestors or sick from witchcraft? Then the diviner shakes the basket with both hands and proceeds to interpret the symbolic articles as they land inside the basket in successive configurations. Now and then, the diviner asks the clients to confirm or deny his pronouncements, and a new cascade of questioning, tossing, and interpreting ensues. Although séances are conducted with great formality and the divinatory speech includes highly esoteric references, all ritual participants, including the clients, share a general understanding of the event: it is a divination ritual, a ritual during which ancestral knowledge is revealed.

At first sight, a séance is not an affliction ritual. Divination and affliction rituals are performed for different purposes (revelation of knowledge and healing, respectively), and their overall structure and patterns of ritual action differ considerably. Unlike affliction rituals, séances are not tripartite events that succeed one another in a span of weeks or months. Neither are they night-long events filled with drumming and singing and splashing, as is the case with the first and third parts of affliction rituals, as well as object animation rituals. In other words, séances are not *vilika*. Séances consist to a large degree of a long, highly structured conversation, at least today, a fact that people openly acknowledge when they associate séances not with singing and drumming (*kwimbila*) but with conversing (*kuhanjika*).

Yet divination sessions and affliction rituals are both interwoven with the thematic thread of affliction. I have mentioned above that earlier in the twentieth century, particularly in the case of death, séances included stretches of drumming, singing, and dancing, a fact suggestive perhaps of a degree of affinity between divining for someone and singing for someone. But we do not need to corroborate this historical hypothesis in order to show that the thread of affliction is present in divination sessions. Séances are affliction rituals. Only by being possessed by Kayongo can the diviner and his oracle divine.

Every séance opens with a relatively brief, highly formulaic rite of invocation, or *kukombela*. Holding a sacred rattle, the diviner invokes Kayongo as well as an entourage of dead and living powerful figures (basket diviners, regional chiefs, and national heads of state) to join him in the séance and help him divine for his clients (fig. 2). Although the diviner is neither sick nor in a state of possession trance, he is nevertheless within the grasp of Kayongo. Similarly to affliction rituals and object animation rituals, séances are Kayongo rituals. In séances, too, Kayongo takes hold of diviners and their divination baskets, objectifying the diviners in the form of possession (without trance) and personifying their baskets. Possessed human bodies and material objects, both of which are fully capable of revealing ancestral knowledge,

FIG. 2.—Diviner Mutondo doing the invocation as he shakes a *musambo* rattle, Chavuma, 1996 (photo by author).

are therefore the main forms that the thread of affliction takes on in the context of basket divination.

What, then, of the thread of initiation? Although, from a scholarly perspective, a divination session can be fruitfully conceptualized as a rite of passage in which the clients move from a stage of opacity to one of clarity, it is important to note that northwest Zambians do not perceive this movement as an initiation. This fact explains, I think, the relatively thinner presence of the thread of initiation in *séances*. This is the case notwithstanding the cultural and historical closeness between the male-dominated institutions of basket divination (*ngombo yakusekula*) and the boys initiation ceremony (*mukanda*), both of which presumably originated in the northern Lunda kingdom in what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Thin though it is, the thread of initiation is all the same present in *séances*. It is present in the biographical form of the ritual expertise and professional identity of individual diviners, many of whom are renowned *vakafunda*. (As mentioned, *vakafunda* are ritual specialists who are responsible for the boys' well-

being during male initiation.) The thread of initiation also appears in séances in the material form of a divinatory article contained in the basket. This article is known as Chikuza. Typically, the name Chikuza brings to mind an aggressive mask dancer (*likishi*) who roams through the villages during male initiation ceremonies. People say that Chikuza likes to chase women and children and threaten them with weapons. In spite of such aggressive behavior, this mask dancer is also associated with fertility and success in hunting.²⁷ Inside the basket, now in the form of a roughly five-centimeter-long wooden figure topped with a tall conical shape, Chikuza represents an equally ambiguous array of significata: huntsmanship, fertility, and a much-feared illness caused by a masked dancer seen in dreams.²⁸ The particular meanings that Chikuza materializes depend on the particular diviner, the particular problem being divined, and the particular configuration of symbolic articles being examined. This is because, in Turner's words, "divinatory symbols are multireferential, and their referents are highly autonomous and readily detachable from one another."²⁹

CONCLUSION

Scholars of ritual and religion have tended to ascribe similarity to the internal space of categories and difference to the relation among categories. This tendency is as common in the study of taxonomy as it is in human cognition more generally. In the words of the cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, we lump at the intracategorical level and split at the intercategorical level.³⁰ At the same time, however, we are equally capable to see both differences within and similarities across. Authors such as J. Z. Smith, Goldschmidt, and Satlow have shown the critical value of differentiating within.³¹ There are different Judaismisms within Judaism, they argue, and it is important to stress those differences for heuristic, political, and religious reasons. In my study of rituals of affliction, divination, and object animation in northwest Zambia, I have attempted to demonstrate that it is equally possible and as effective to fight the reductionism of classic taxonomies and ideological partitions by stressing not the differences within categories but the similarities across categories. The moment we place three different yet similar rituals side by side, shifting the analysis from the internal space of one category to the connections among different categories,

²⁷ Manuel Jordán, *Makishi: Mask Characters of Zambia* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum, 2006), 77.

²⁸ Jordán, "Tossing Life in a Basket," 255; Rodrigues de Areia, *Les symboles divinatoires*, 183–85.

²⁹ Turner, *Revelation and Divination*, 221.

³⁰ Eviatar Zerubavel, "Lumping and Splitting: Notes on Social Classification," *Sociological Forum* 11, no. 3 (1996): 422.

³¹ Smith, "Fences and Neighbors," 18; Goldschmidt, "Religion, Reductionism, and the Godly Soul"; and Satlow, "Defining Judaism."

we see the same thematic threads recurring and crisscrossing in all three rituals, forming different patterns and configurations. This perspective brings out the similarities that different rituals share. And although the topic of ritual classification in northwest Zambia is less politically charged than Judaism and Judaisms, both in the public sphere and the academe, insisting on commonalities instead of differences, particularly fixed differences, is an important perspective to offer with significant implications for the way we classify—not only our rituals but also humanity and the world.

From this perspective, I have attempted to show in my three descriptive portraits that rituals of affliction, object animation, and divination share multiple overlapping and crisscrossing similarities, sometimes overall similarities, and other times similarities of detail. They share first of all the thematic threads that shape and constitute them, an overall commonality that undermines any purist attempt at marking fixed boundaries among those rituals. Although it is still possible and appropriate to employ the concepts of affliction, object animation, and divination to designate the ritual events in which those processes become dominant, we should not forget that all three rituals are woven with the same threads in different configurations. Each thread recurs in a proliferation of forms (spiritual, material, etiological, bodily, experiential, biographic) and a multiplicity of media (visual, tactile, aural, performative).

At the same time, if one considers the movements, gestures, acts, objects, bodies, and sounds that constitute those thematic threads as well as the terms that people employ to designate their rituals, one sees several patterns of resemblance crisscrossing one another. Now, affliction and object animation rituals are closer to one another than they are to séances, a pattern that Turner made legendary in his book *Revelation and Divination*. In contrast to divination, affliction and object animation are nightlong events filled with drumming and singing, being often designated as “singing for someone” and “drum.” These nightlong events are also designated as *vilika*, a term loosely applied today to all manner of collective performances involving music and dance in the broadest sense—from “drums” and life-crisis rituals to spontaneous, non-religious dance gatherings—but not séances. Equally important, only affliction and object animation rituals are considered “healing” rituals (from *kuka*, to heal or treat with medicinal substances). In these rituals, the desired transformation—curing an illness and animating an object—is similarly achieved with endless acts of splashing and rubbing of medicated water, the uttering of certain words and formulae, and also drumming and singing. From this perspective, séances are not “healing” rituals, even though they are, for the clients, a crucial step in the difficult trajectory that Janzen calls “quest for therapy.”³²

³² John M. Janzen, *The Quest for Therapy in Lower Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

Interestingly, although affliction and object animation are both “healing” rituals in the sense just noted, object animation and séances are closer to one another than they are to affliction rituals in one notorious respect: the absence of biological illness. Only in affliction rituals are the diviners ill.

Therefore, taken together, in addition to inviting us to think polythetically, these two crisscrossing patterns of partial similarities among three different rituals invite us to rethink our categories of affliction and healing, broadening the semantic scope of both: of “healing,” to include both the ritual cure of a biological condition and the ritual “treating” of persons and objects when no one is sick; of “affliction,” to include both the experience of being caught and possessed by an afflicting spirit in the form of disease and, later, trance and the experience of being possessed by a spirit during ritual when one is neither sick nor in a trance.

In addition to partial, crisscrossing similarities, I see overall resemblances. Although the three rituals are performed with distinct purposes in mind—healing, animating a material object, and divining—they are collectively seen as the necessary steps and prerequisites without which the cultural practice of basket divination would not be possible. In order to divine, an ordinary man must be caught by Kayongo, be healed and initiated into basket divination in the context of an affliction ritual, and ensure that his original and subsequent diving baskets undergo a similar process of initiation in the context of full-blown object animation rituals. At this level, all three rituals are directed toward the same end, divination.

The three rituals of affliction, object animation, and divination also share the same ontological identity as Kayongo rituals: it is Kayongo who afflicts a living man, making him sick and forcing his relatives to take up the heavy burden of commissioning an affliction ritual; it is Kayongo who creates *lipele* oracles by possessing both the baskets and their owners; and it is Kayongo who reveals the truth to all sufferers who come to him for knowledge. In all three cases, “ritual” is understood as a collective, multifaceted effort at persuading Kayongo to manifest himself among the living by possessing both subjects and objects. The ensuing interplay between the objectification of subjects and the personification of objects is the hallmark of Kayongo and other *mahamba* rituals.³³ Kayongo the red spirit is one of the faces of ritual efficacy and transformation in south Central Africa.

Says Grimes of authors who treat rituals as belonging to gods: “Reading these, one wonders what would happen if, for example, we imagined the ‘rites of Yahweh,’ rather than the rites of Christianity or Judaism, to be the appropriate unit of study.”³⁴ One possibility, I think, would be the privileging of

³³ Silva, *Along an African Border*.

³⁴ Grimes, “Research in Ritual Studies,” 6.

similarities and the seeing of common thematic threads and their manifold polythetic expressions.

I end with a few notes on matters of analysis and classification. In addition to challenging researchers to acknowledge the agency and protagonism of spiritual beings in ritual performance, the tracing of lines across different rituals offers a pathway in between analytical domains. Being ritual action itself, thematic threads such as affliction, initiation, and divination belong to the relatively bounded space of ritual events within which they gain shape and form. Being switch points that link to human premises and concerns at multiple levels—ontological, normative, moral, cosmological, etiological, and existential, to name a few—they speak to particular modes of life as well as the various contexts and circumstances in which people plan and perform their rituals. For this reason, a focus on thematic threads enables the supple intellectual movement between different analytical domains that the holistic study of ritual and religion necessitates. By promising a more perspicuous representation in which the connections among facts are visible, such a focus is also likely to strengthen what David Decosimo calls our claims to resemblance in comparative work.³⁵

What, then, to do with the old typologies? What to do with the old collection of more or less stable, more or less defined, and more or less standard categories? Should we discard them? After all, there are no pure affliction rituals or pure divination rituals or pure object animation rituals out there that mirror those concepts, any more than there are rituals out there that serve as exemplars of the *summum genus* of our typologies—“ritual” or “religion.” Rather than discarding our ragged concepts and categories, I suggest that we recast them as crisscrossing threads. These threads recur across rituals in different configurations and a sea of forms, turning the rituals in which they recur into spaces of heterogeneity that “are *related* to one another in many different ways.”³⁶ More important than terminological cleansing is to ensure that the principle of similarity is never out of mind. Similarity lets us see through, get across, reach out. Similarity is our best corrective to the excessive distilling and purifying and the kind of partitioning and segregation that is likely to occur when we take our concepts, and ourselves, too seriously.

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³⁵ David Decosimo, “Comparison and the Ubiquity of Resemblance,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (2010): 226–58.

³⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 31e.