

# Grassroots historiography: Tshibumba's *Histoire du Zaïre*<sup>1</sup>

Jan Blommaert

Tshibumba Kanda Matulu is one of the best-known painters from Congo (formerly Zaire). His works have been shown all over the world and some of his paintings, for instance those on Lumumba's death, are widely known. An important contribution to the study of Tshibumba's oeuvre was Johannes Fabian's *Remembering the Present* (1996). In this book, Fabian discussed a series of 101 paintings presented by Tshibumba in 1972/1973 on the history of Zaire. Fabian also presents the narratives on the paintings told by Tshibumba, and he emphasizes Tshibumba's explicit ambition to be seen as a *historian*, not just a painter. Not mentioned in this book, however, is the fact that Tshibumba *wrote* a history of the Congo in 1980. It is this document that I shall discuss in this paper.

The angle I will take in this discussion is the following. An ethnographic inspection of written documents such as that of Tshibumba raises issues of ideologies of writing, articulated in socially stratified mappings of resources onto functions. The resources are literacy and memory (or more generally, information). The function is historiography, a particular genre to which the resources are oriented. Individual resources – an author's repertoire – are embedded in economies of resources, and an analysis of these resources may yield some insights into voice: the particular ways in which a socially situated subject produces versions and visions of reality in language. My argument will be that only an analysis of voice can construct Tshibumba's document as a historiography. A document is old, but it can become a historical document if we put it through a series of ethnographic interpretive procedures that recover voice.

But let us first turn to the document. Tshibumba's *Histoire du Zaïre* is 73 pages long, handwritten in a cheap copybook in monoglot French. The latter is remarkable, since Tshibumba lives in Shaba (the Southern province of Congo) where a pidginized variety of Swahili is spoken in which massive codeswitching to French occurs. Monoglot varieties of both Swahili and

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French are rare. The document contains chapters and chapter titles but does so in an unsystematic way: chapter titles disappear halfway through the text. Seen from a normative viewpoint, the French in which it is written is replete with orthographic and grammatical or lexical errors. Also, the historical narrative contains lots of anachronisms and errors in chronological sequence. In contrast to other handwritten documents from the same region, Tshibumba's handwriting is clear and beautiful, possibly the effect of a steady artist's hand used to putting graphic signs on a surface. If we take a historian's point of view (and so adopt a series of normative textual, discursive and generic ideologies regimenting the construction of history as a knowledge domain), the document contains little if any 'new' information. Tshibumba was not an eyewitness nor a privileged observer of important events and his discussions of history do not substantially add to the factual knowledge of the history of his country.

In sum, from the normative viewpoint articulated above, the value of the document as historiography is not immediately clear. So what does the document teach us? My suggestion is that it informs us on two things: the way in which Tshibumba is placed in economies of information, and the way in which he is placed in economies of linguistic-communicative resources. Both these 'placements' determine the way in which he realizes the genre of historiography – in other words, they organize the mapping of resources onto functions.

Let us start with the economies of information. One of the striking aspects of the text is the consistent way in which Tshibumba articulates a universalist ambition, closely associated to his self-identification as "artist-painter-historian" (on the final page of the document, above his signature). Throughout the text, the narrative and textual key is declarative and factual. Judgmental statements are all but absent, and there is no first-person-singular in the text. Whenever Tshibumba appears in the story, he appears as an observer, not as an actor or a judge. 'Objectivity' is definitely part of the way in which Tshibumba imagines historiography as a genre.

But in contrast to this universalist ambition, we see how large sections of the text are dominated by a localist perspective. Tshibumba is a Luba-man from Shaba, and the way in which he writes the story of his country is almost literally 'from Shaba'. Far more emphasis is given to events in Shaba and neighboring regions (the Luba-regions) than to 'national' events. He doesn't write history from the political and informative 'center' of his country (Kinshasa), nor from a general, 'national' plane. He writes large portions

of this history on the basis of how information about events reached him in Shaba. Tshibumba's perspective is spatially and regionally 'placed', and Shaba is a cognitive filter on his view of national history. But this localist perspective shifts as soon as the Mobutu period is treated. We then see how he moves into a 'national' platform. Anecdotes give way to slogans and descriptions of symbols (e.g. the new currency, party symbols) and Shaba becomes invisible until the period of the Shaba wars in the late 1970s is treated.

In a most transparent way, four sources can be clearly distinguished in the narrative. First, there are textual traces of Belgian official schoolbook history, especially when Tshibumba describes the early period of exploration and colonization. A second set of textual traces leads us to the mass media in early independent Congo. Fabian notes how Tshibumba was an avid reader of newspapers, and certainly when the period of instability of the early 1960s is treated, we find influences of organized streams of information reaching him in Shaba. A third source is Mobutist propaganda, especially in the parts in which he writes about the 'unification' of the country under Mobutu. And finally, a fourth source is his own experience as a subject with particular roots in a place – Shaba – and interests vested in the fate of an ethnic group – the Luba. All in all, Tshibumba emerges as a *receiver* of information. More specifically he emerges as someone who has access only to information that is autobiographically grounded, connected to forms of insertion into information streams during particular phases of his life: schoolbooks in his childhood, mass media later and Mobutist propaganda still later. The sources reflect stages in his life, and they stress the way in which Tshibumba is 'placed', locally and consequently also in patterns of distribution of information. The universalist ambition is thus deeply constrained by access to information, which is in turn the result of Tshibumba's specific, non-elite placement in Congolese society.

Let us now take a look at how Tshibumba is placed in economies of linguistic-communicative resources. I already mentioned the emphasis on neutral, objective, declarative writing as part of his imagination of the genre of historiography. Also, the point of the exercise is writing. The first section of the text is a sort of preamble in which Tshibumba offers what could be called 'methodological remarks'. He stresses the fact that history in Africa has been a site of contention because Africans were illiterate and he provides examples of false historical truths and multiple versions of history. His aim is to clarify by describing – writing – neutrally and objectively.

But there is more. The text is written in monoglot French – the language of instruction and clarification according to Fabian. It is important to realize what an enormous effort must have been invested in constructing a monoglot text, without any traces of vernacular language usage (of which we know that it is dominated by deeply mixed varieties of Swahili-French). It is also interesting to note that Tshibumba *narrated* his history to Fabian in Swahili, but he *writes* it in French. It is a feature we encountered before in other grassroots literacy documents from Shaba: monoglot language use is a distinct marker of a ‘serious’ written genre; it reflects an ideology of text in which text is lifted into a new – elite – order of discourse when it is monoglot and written in prestigious codes. But there is still more to it. The text is divided into chapters with chapter titles, and Tshibumba takes care to provide all kinds of chronological clues in his narrative. Both things are done with great difficulty and with lots of errors, but the effort is probably more important than the product here. In a postscript, he also specifies that the historian’s job is to look at the past, not at the present.

So now we have a bundle of features that lead us into generic imaginations of historiography. Historiography to Tshibumba is a written, heavily regimented textual mode, linear, structured and monoglot, with a particular orientation to a cognitive domain – the past. Shifting into this mode creates history, it repositions knowledge in a new frame, different from his paintings or his narratives to Fabian: the historian emerges when he starts to write in a generically modelled way. The key words here are control and discipline: the writing is not at random, nor is the organization of knowledge. Everything is governed by rules derived from generic imaginations, probably distant memories of schoolbooks or catechisms as Fabian notes.

He does so in order to remember and to remind. Tshibumba works in exacting conditions, with heavily restricted access to information and with restricted access to linguistic-communicative resources. He clearly has no archive or any other kind of structured and lasting documentation, and writing in itself is the structuring tool that constructs remembering. He has no archive also in the sense that he does not keep his own text: the notebook was given away after having been written, and it becomes a reminder for the interested Western anthropologist, not for himself. So history comes about as soon as remembering can be turned into a reminder: a disciplined, generically controlled written textual artefact.

I’ll conclude. What makes Tshibumba’s text a historical document, rather than just an old document, is the way in which he produces a particular

voice. That is, the way in which he enacts a series of ideologies of text and language that allow him to lay claims on a particular genre (in other words: the way in which he maps resources onto functions), and this against the background of larger economies of information and linguistic-communicative resources. It is the way in which singular instances of text fit into these larger patterns that attributes value to the singular texts and creates voice – an ethnographically detectable and deeply situated placement of text and meaning.

Documents become historical as soon as we have restored voice to them. Carlo Ginzburg demonstrated this with respect to a 17<sup>th</sup>-century miller from Friuli. It can be productively applied to subjects from Africa, Latin America or other disenfranchised parts of the world where regimes of language work in different ways from ours, and where knowledge, truth and historical experience consequently take on different shapes.