Likaka recounts his mentor’s unfavorable reaction to his suggestion, in the 1980s, that the names Congolese gave colonial officials could serve as historical sources. He then gives a brief overview of how historiography has evolved over the last thirty years, finally opening up the space for this project. Likaka’s wrestling with “the questions of scope and ability of naming to record important details of colonial village daily life” (p. 7) leads him to the following conclusion: “the exploration of names supplements macro-analysis privileged by previous paradigms that produced ‘history without people’ and denied Africans their agency” (p. 10). He argues that anthroponyms, because they were “contemporary mnemonic devices” that captured Congolese experiences and mindsets, “provide the inside view of colonialism” (p. 10).

The introduction deals with methodological questions, the contexts and interpretations of names, and sources. The first chapter offers a brief overview of pre-colonial naming practices. Chapter 2 describes the disruptive effects of colonialism on „the village world.” The third chapter analyzes numerous examples of names and examines the criteria and linguistic devices used in naming, for example „reduplication, suffixation, onomatopoeias, local mispronunciations, morphological congruencies, praise, and double naming” (p. 60). Two chronological chapters follow: „Early Naming, Explorations, Trade and Rubber Collection” and „Naming and Belgian Colonial Rule.” As can be seen, there is a certain amount of doubling back in the layout of the chapters. Perhaps this can best be described as a kind of spiraling pattern; we both return and move forward. But this tendency can also lead to redundancies, and at worst, a separation between the book’s focus on naming and contextualization (as in Chapter 2 which offers a good overview of the colonial period for those not already familiar with it but does not include naming practices). The final two of the seven chapters, the most compelling, examine the strategic ambiguities included in many praise names („Talking under One’s Breath”) and the negotiations between colonial officials and Congolese occasioned by mutual understandings of many of the ambiguities mentioned in the previous chapter („Confronting African Voices”).

Likaka’s analysis of „Bula Matari” is noteworthy because of its well-known association with Henry Morton Stanley. At first „an imperative suggestive of a colonial language of command”—„Break rocks!”—the semantic field of the phrase „broadened to include the totalitarian power and violence of the colonial state” (p. 56). Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that the colonials themselves—those who advocated force as the most effective instrument of social control—chose to embrace this term. The alternative, „Ipanga Ngunda” which means „He who destroys the country” (p. 85) and which coexisted alongside „Bula Matari,” was just too damning.

The name „Kitatshindja” is a good example of Likaka’s point that naming (including double naming and the multidimensionality of the meanings of names) was part of a broader anti-colonial discourse (p. 134). The name given to a colonial official in Kasongo means „slaughter” or „He who cuts people into pieces,” a name that captures his brutality. But the prefix ki „denoted anything of little importance, contempt, and condescension” (p. 147). Thus, when Moltedo used the name to scare people, he was in fact also saying: „I am a despicable little man” (p. 148). It is difficult to measure the real impact of surreptitious discourse. But Likaka argues that most colonial officials were aware of the forms of resis-
tance contained in their names and in some instances it changed their interactions with the villagers, either by sapping their authority or tormenting their consciences (p. 156).

Likaka examines both generic and individual names. Under generic names we find those associated with cash crops: „White man of …“ and it could be cotton, rice, coffee, or palm oil tree, names that contain subtexts, such as severed hands, burned homes, and women taken hostage in the case of rubber (p. 88). Individual names can be shocking in their frank descriptiveness: they range from „Home burner“ (p. 88) to „Office that resembles a battlefield“ (p. 89). Named phenomena include the highly evocative „wando wo limolo“ which means „tax-caused loss of weight“ (p. 90). The names conjure up the contexts in which they arose: cash crops, roads, the whip, prison, mining, railroads, and the legal system (notably the native courts), tight control and surveillance, supplying food to parasitic officials who did not produce food, etc. Although mentioned in Chapter 2, birth-spacing, polygyny, and post-partum abstinence get little further attention.

Because names are collective expressions, the gender dynamics internal to the naming community are not necessarily evident. Congolese critiques of Western gender relations and sex roles included naming officials deemed to behave like women „Mondele Madami“ (p. 125). The name „Bwana Kitoko,“ meaning „Mr. Handsome,“ that the colonials were happy to use to refer to King Baudouin, in fact carried connotations of „deficiencies in masculinity and manhood“ (p. 124). But what names were used to record the kinds of violence women suffered and who did the naming? The end of Chapter 5 segues from the loss of manhood into the discourse about defiling women and the sexual and economic abuse of women. Likaka lists the advantages to Congolese women of long term relationships with European men: they could escape agricultural labor and secure materials rewards. He then quotes a woman who had had a „premarital affair“ in the 1950s: „I may not be the prettiest woman of the village, but I have slept with a white man“ (p. 113). But, in part because most of his interviewees denied the existence of such relationships, the question is not pursued in depth. A few titles, both old and new, would complement Likaka’s bibliography on gender in general and on the „housekeeper“ phenomenon in particular.¹

Lauro argues that in the 1920s the „ménagère“ became „a full-fledged colonial ‘character’“ or „a kind of institution, practically unavoidable, of life in the Congo“ (p. 193). Early on, the Jesuit Vermeersch had emphasized the crude commercial exchange the phenomenon often entailed. For example, a woman could be leased for 25 francs a month „by the native chief, chieffess, or any other owner“ (p. 29). But Lauro does also offer examples of affection between couples, despite the official discourse treating the ménagères as interchangeable (pp. 127–30).

Likaka acknowledges that this practice has, at least in part, its roots in the nineteenth century practice of local leaders offering „female companionship“ (115) to important guests and travelers, and he offers examples of colonials „manipulating the tradition to save their positions“ (p. 115). He leaves out the „crude“ names used to „identify colonial officials [who] were sexually abusing women“ (118). His examples mostly have connotations of womanizing such as „Lover of women“ (p. 118). One interviewee represents colonial sexual predatory behavior as „eagles stealing chicken in one’s own backyard“ (p. 118). Likaka concludes: „This powerful image shows the power struggle between Congolese and European men over access to Congolese women“ (p. 118). The obvious question is what the women’s say was in all of this. We do not know what names they gave or wanted to give, not only to colonial officials with whom they entered into relationships with but also to male intermediaries from their own communities.

The book is scattered with fascinating examples of how names functioned, the purpo-

ses they served, and the duplicitous messages they often contained. But not all the examples are equally illuminating. How other researchers and historiographers respond to his work will decide whether in fact Likaka’s study lives up to all the author’s claims. This innovative study was obviously a labor of love. May it well open new areas of research as it has enriched old ones, bringing more African collective voices to our understanding of the struggle “over the real and symbolic boundaries of power, domination and exploitation” (p. 159) in the Belgian Congo and beyond.