among men who have sex with other men since at least 1998, it was not mentioned in Malawi AIDS policy until 2003, and no funds were allocated for prevention or treatment until 2013.

This excellent book should also prompt reflection among anthropologists themselves. Biruk observes that the subject formation of an anthropologist used to be framed by long stays in a single locale. In contrast to the project-hopping demographers, anthropologists still benefit from slow study; but now they are as likely as demographers to be linked to the work of NGOs and dependent on their associated mobilities. In the case of critical studies in global health, this often places the anthropologist among those administering biomedical programmes and not, as perhaps was the case before, among the 'beneficiaries' of such programmes. Such an approach gives anthropologists such as Biruk the benefit of observing intercultural interfaces at multiple scales, but it requires more effort to take up the perspective of the most disadvantaged. This is certainly an obligation that Biruk discharges with diligence. However, it is notable that in identifying the contradiction between critical and useful studies, and in advocating a form of care to bridge that gap, it is the demographer and the field researcher, rather than the people of the villages, who are the primary objects of critical and useful care.

I wonder if there is scope for a 'social life of numbers' that steps over the household threshold and interrogates subject formation among the objects of the surveys. Many households have been surveyed multiple times as part of longitudinal studies. Indeed, the 'projectification of the African landscape' (p. 14), as the author argues, has helped to produce research fatigue and led to understandable resentment about the tokenistic bar of soap given in return for participation. Clearly, being surveyed creates an expectation that the information being collected will guide state policies and ultimately bring about tangible benefits. Biruk is acute in noting how bloodsucker rumours can circulate out of such disappointed hopes. Yet I wonder if the substance of the questions also shapes subjectivities. If people are asked about men who have sex with men, does it normalize or scapegoat this new focus of state curiosity?

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Ramon Sarró, *Inventing an African Alphabet: Writing, Art, and Kongo Culture in the DRC*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £85 – 978 1 009 19949 0). 2023, xvi + 199 pp.

Mandombe is usually presented as a native script used to write Kikongo and several other languages in the Democratic Republic of Congo – a script invented in the late 1970s by David Wabeladio Payi, who claims it was revealed to him by Simon Kimbangu, the prophet of Kimbanguism. But, as Ramon Sarró's book shows, there is much more to Mandombe and its invention than this conventional narrative suggests.

Sarró's deeply personal book is above all a tribute to David Wabeladio Payi, who was a friend of the author's for the last four years of his life, before Wabeladio's premature death in 2013. The book's focus is, in large part, biographical; the overall tone is one of unabashed celebration. Part II, which forms the core of the book, is a biography-qua-autobiography of Wabeladio, who also co-wrote that section. Parts III and IV put Mandombe and its genesis into context, investigating, among other things, Mandombe's connection with Congolese identity, and its manifold nature: a script that is also a form of art and a lesson in geometry.

The turning point in Wabeladio's life is the mystical crisis that he underwent in 1978, culminating in the invention of the basic geometric shapes that would later form the basis of the Mandombe writing system. In the decade that followed, Wabeladio developed his invention single-mindedly, facing near unanimous disapproval and incomprehension. One of the book's contributions is to show how different Mandombe was, in its first decades of existence, from what it would later become. At its core, Wabeladio's invention is a set of geometric shapes coupled with a series of geometric operations (like rotation or mirror inversion) that can be used to generate novel shapes. The idea of using this system as the basis for a writing system was not clearly present until the late 1980s at the earliest. As for the religious or ideological meaning of Wabeladio's system, it was just as difficult to grasp during this decade. Wabeladio was and remained a devout Catholic until 1988, even though he never doubted that this 1978 revelation derived from prophet Simon Kimbangu (a claim that Sarró fact-checked with several direct witnesses to the event). Even after Wabeladio's conversion to Kimbanguism, Mandombe retained important ties with other religious movements, such as Bundu dia Kongo – Wabeladio's ambivalence towards this movement notwithstanding. (Bundu dia Kongo is a political and religious movement whose beliefs revolve around Kongo ethnicity.)

As for politics, the tight identification of Wabeladio's system with Kongo culture seems to have solidified no earlier than the mid-1990s, with the coining of the name Mandombe (lit. 'for the Africans') and the founding of the Centre de l'Écriture Négro-Africaine (the chief organization in charge of disseminating and teaching Mandombe). In any case, it was thanks to the institutional infrastructure provided by Kimbanguism, Bundu dia Kongo and Kongo cultural institutions that Mandombe took off and attained its current position as an iconic Congolese script.

Mandombe may owe its diffusion and fame to its use as a writing system, but this aspect of Wabeladio's invention is not central to Sarró's book. Readers, for example, should not expect a detailed examination of Mandombe's semiology as a writing system. Is Mandombe an abugida or (as Sarró claims) an alphabet? How does Mandombe handle tones? Such questions are not raised and the author has an excellent reason for neglecting them. Many people learn to write in Mandombe, but very few routinely use it for that purpose. Almost all users of Mandombe are already literate in the Roman alphabet (Sarró mentions only one observation to the contrary, on p. 21). The system is, by its inventor's own admission, cumbersome and difficult to learn; once learned, it is soon forgotten for lack of practice. One gets a sense (even though Sarró does not say so explicitly) that learning and teaching Mandombe have much more to do with the performative celebration of a cultural identity than with literacy.

In fact, there is much more to Mandombe than its use as a writing system. Sarró focuses his book on Mandombe art, only hinting at its cosmological interpretations.

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The geometric properties of Mandombe are succinctly described and, while Sarró echoes Wabeladio's claim that they constitute a major discovery, he does not dwell much on them. The system rests on standard geometric operations, also present in other writing systems and decorative art. Mandombe exploits these operations at an unprecedented level of systematicity. Although other scripts also make extensive use of rotation or mirror inversion (e.g. Evans's script for Cree), Mandombe turns these geometric operations into art forms.

Overall, this thoughtful book is a worthy addition to the literature on the origins of writing systems, and a moving tribute to a highly original mind.

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Erin Pettigrew, *Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara: Islam, Spiritual Mediation, and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £90 – 978 1 009 22461 1). 2023, ccclxviii + 368 pp.

This book by historian Erin Pettigrew is a welcome contribution to our understanding of esoteric practices – both authorized (*ḥjāb*) and 'unlawful' (*siḥr*) – in the Saharan west and their close association with Islamic traditions that are deeply embedded in this region. Due to the complexities of the social landscape and the region's multifaceted history, Pettigrew's study draws primarily on ethnographic methods. This rapprochement between anthropology and history, already tested by others working in the region, is noteworthy. Although the region is often described as an important hub for written sources in Arabic, many interlocutors lack formal education, and access to written sources in this largely post-nomadic context is limited. Pettigrew's work is thus part of a shift to bridge disciplinary divides in order to analytically consider a complex African setting, while also making an important methodological statement.

The book efficiently covers the core topics of Islamic culture in this geographic context: the recognized schools of Islamic jurisprudence (notably the Maliki school), Sufism, reformist trends, and a multitude of scholars and authors who have defined the Sahara's broader incorporation into the wider Muslim world. The adherence to 'legitimate' Islamic traditions is here debated through another corpus of knowledge that has also significantly influenced lived experience in the Sahara, a corpus that, according to the author, has often been disregarded and 'denied a place in academic history writing – the "unbelieved," the "unseen," the "unknown," the "supernatural"' (p. 4). To incorporate these aspects into her project, Pettigrew defends the use of esoteric expertise as a fundamental marker in the definition of certain group identities, notably the *zwāya* (clerics) in the northern regions of the lower Senegal River and their Fulbe counterparts, the *torodbe*, who are dispersed along the broader western Sahel. The pivotal role played by such actors in education and in the quotidian management of Islamic rituals, combined with their command of esoteric knowledge, has deeply shaped the lives of Saharans. According to the author, it was not until the nineteenth century