A Note on Currencies and Talk

The currencies Africans allude to in the interviews quoted in this book—shillings in the sterling zone of British colonization and francs in the Belgian Congo—cover a range of values and, indeed, a range of meanings. In colonial times, East African shillings (which replaced rupees in 1921) were reckoned in pounds, shillings, and pence at the rate of 20/- = £1 and 100 cents to the shilling. In colonial Kenya or Uganda, sums of 2/50 or 15/75 were commonplace. In colonial Northern Rhodesia, however, the currency had deep ties to England (and none to India), and the currency was pounds, shillings, and pence, with £1 = 20/- and 1/- = 12 pence. Thus, in chapter 9, figures of 2/6 or 11/6 are common. At independence, East African nations retained shillings, while Northern Rhodesia’s currency became Zambia’s kwacha.

These interviews, however, were done between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, during which time currencies in Africa devalued drastically. It is almost impossible to tell if a reference to 50 shillings in a vampire story from Nairobi in the late 1920s told to me in 1976 by a woman who had heard it in the 1930s was 50/- at its 1976 value, its 1930s value, or its earlier value. It may also not be terribly worthwhile to try to find out the exact value of the shilling in this or any other account. What this and other speakers meant was that a specific value could be put on abduction and extraction, that that value was of an amount worth recalling, and that it was an amount of some significance. When men in Uganda asked my assistants and I if we would not be willing to
secure a liter of blood for 50,000/-, they did mean present-day rates of exchange, not to fix an exact value on a liter of blood, but to show that this was a payment for which individuals might have done extraordinary things. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Congolese data made available to me through interviews conducted for Bogumil Jewsiewicki in 1991. Referring to the early 1940s—World War II—Africans spoke of the Fr 2,50 African women received for helping batumbula find victims. Whatever the value of this figure to the speaker, the reference to francs in a wartime story erased the occupation of Belgium and the use of the Reichsmark there, and gave Africans a way to speak about the continuities of Belgian rule, despite the fall of Belgium and a weak government in exile in London. The Africans who recalled the protests of the 1940s, protests fueled by the conquests of Belgium, nevertheless naturalized Belgian rule when they spoke in francs. Indeed, this particular reference to francs suggests something else, something that is a point of this book, that details and facts and figures not only describe but illustrate: they are used to get a point across, to make clear, to demonstrate, to reveal that these were specific actions done by people for specific rewards. People tell stories about bloodsucking, and they give details in shillings and francs to make their points.