THEORISING THE POSTCOLONY OR THE FORCE OF THE COMMANDEMENT: MEDITATIONS ON ACHILLE MBEMBE'S "ON THE POSTCOLONY"

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Since the publication of his influential essay, "Provisional Notes on the Post colony" (1992), Achille Mbembe has demonstrated he is a theorist to watch. Indeed, Mbembe has succeeded in finding an interesting niche for himself within the field of African studies by creating a particular mode of discourse that combines the best traditions of social science together with the humanities.

He had served as the executive director of CODESRIA, the largest social science research institute for about four years, yet he has been able to invent a kind of theorising that demonstrates the various purposes for which the grandest traditions of the humanities could be employed in debating, portraying and reconstituting the topics on, and relating to Africa. Contemporary social science practices in Africa have tended to be overly positivistic in a way that one only foresees dead –ends and missed opportunities.

On the Postcolony, Mbembe's first major book to be published in English definitely forces us to reconsider the strategies of textual construction for portraying Africa from the colonial moment to the present times. Postcolonial Africa is a subject that had become rather uninteresting because of its endless and predictable litany of political failures, economic crises and in some cases cultural stasis. Thus to contemplate a continent in seemingly endless decline had also become in academic terms, an exercise in contemplating the boredom of a long drawn-out dead-end. The difficulty from a theoretical and discursive standpoint lies in being able to dwell upon this gorge of ennui and create interesting pictures about the disturbing histories and contemporary realities of Africa. On the Post colony, is a sustained meditation on this crucial problematique.

So many negatives have been ascribes and are still being ascribed to Africa. Africa is the mad, unreasonable and dark other by which the West states its claims of difference. Africa is the sub-human void waiting to be penetrated, conquered and reinvented by Western gaze, reason and technology. Africa is the continent that if left to itself continually collapses into madness, misery and destruction. Africa, in spite of the voluptuousness of untamed nature, eats itself. This is the Africa that steadily assaults the senses and human reason. Yet in spite of this deplorable state of affairs are gets encourages when Mbembe reminds us that "all struggles have become struggles of representation" (2001:6).

The first major task Mbembe sets for him is examining the validity and weakness of some academic disciplines in their constructs of Africa. For in-stance, in relation to the literature of political science and development eco-

nomics he writes, "it becomes clear these disciplines have undermined the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts. In spite of the countless critiques made of theories of social evolutionism and ideologies of development and modernization, the academic output of these disciplines continues, almost entirely, in total thrall to these two teleogies (2001:7). Even more distressingly, academic output deems sub-Saharan Africa as "wrapped in a cloak of impenetrability […] the black hole of reason, the pit where its powerlessness rests unveiled" (2001:7). This apparent state of unreason and powerlessness within African existential sphere is often equated with chaos which is also extended into and evident in the academic realm as Mbembe points out. Hence, the rather harsh judgement; "the literature lapses into repetition, plagianism; dogmatic assertions, cavalier interpretations and shallow rehashes become the order of the day" (2001:a4).

If the above judgement relates to the African academic output, Mbembe has equally caustic remarks about Western rationality and by extension, universalism:

> The uncompromising nature of the Western self and its active negation of anything not itself had the counter effect of reducing African discourse to a simple polemical re affirmation of black humanity. However, both the asserted denial and the reaffirmation of that humanity now look like the two sterile sides of the same coin (2001:12).

It was through Africa's eventual contact with the slave trade and subsequently colonialism that "Africans came face to face with the opaque and murky domain of power, a domain inhabited by obscure drives and that everywhere and always makes animality and bestiality its essential components, plunging human beings into a never-ending process of brutalization" (2001:14).

Within the context of the poverty of research in Africa and the long established traditions of Western ethnocentricism Mbembe inscribes a mode of discourse that announces somewhat apriori, its paradigmatic status in terms of existing explanatory models and discourses about this ways of "inventing" and talking about Africa He concludes his introductory chapter with the evocative title, "Time on the Move" by stating, "I have tried to "write Africa," not as a fiction, but in the harshness of its destiny, its power, and its eccentricities, without laying claim to speak in the name of anyone at all" (2001:17).

The first chapter dwells on what one would call the origins and force of the commandement which are to found in what Mbembe terms the colonial rationality. This rationality has its roots in violence as it is evident in the way the colonial authorities legitimised its foundations, its operations and its self-perpetuating logic. Hegel's master/slave dichotomy provides the epistemic framework for the structural principles behind the inequalities of the colonial relationship;

> … the native subjected to power and to the colonial state could in no way be another "myself". As an animal, he/she was even totally alien to me. His/her manner of seeing the world, his/her manner of being, was not mine. In him/her, it was impossible to discern any power of transcendence. Encapsulated in himself or herself, he/she was a bundle of drives but not of capacities. In such circumstances, the only possible relationship with him/her was one of violence and domination (2001:26).

Thus the commandement as an instrument of social organization is what J. L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff have termed "the colonization of consciousness" and has its origins and its elaboration in the colonial event itself. On the Postcolony traces its various trajectories through the postcolonial moment and also into the present moment of contemporary globalisation. It establishes that the postcolonial state in Africa is an extension of the colonial state with all the attendant processes of brutalisation: violence, force and domination.

In practical and theoretical terms, the dialectic of the commandement which is essentially founded on violence as a strategic instrument could not be reversed with the demise of the colonial state. One of Mbembe's central argument is that its roots extend beyond the post colonial moment in all its various definitions and possibilities. As post colonial subjects, we are products of the commandement and the logic of its violences and we need to carry out painstaking examinations of all our human institutions and habits of consciousness to free ourselves of its tyrannical influence. This is a necessity since Mbembe argues that "neither colonial commandement nor the postcolonial state was able to bring about the total dismantling, still less the disappearance, of every corporation and all lower-order legitimacies bringing people and communities together at the local level" (2001:31-32). As such, it means the forms of consciousness established and projected by the colonial order are still in force. To achieve greater levels of clarity, we must revisit those forms.

Mbembe explores the nexus – in terms of ruptures, continuities and mutual canceling-out – between the colonial order and the post colonial state and unearths a problem we will have to address for a long time to come;

> The general practice of power has followed directly from the colonial political culture and has perpetuated the most despotic aspects of ancestral traditions, themselves reinvented for the occasion. This is the reason why the postcolonial potentate was hostile to public debate, and paid little heed to the distinction between what was justified and what was arbitrary (2001:42).
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> The postcolonial state is contemporary Africa is very peculiar indeed. Having its raison d'tre in the instrumentalisation of force as a condition of existence, it has reconfigured the postcolonial moment in a way that it has become difficult for it to ponder its own processes of atomisation. Thus Mbembe writes, "the state has become a vast machine creating and regulating inequalities" (2001:44).

> Not unexpectedly, this continuous distribution of inequalities has led to increases in the methods by which violence as a foundational and as an existential principle is recycled within the larger society. Mbembe's recent article, "An Essay on the Political Imagination in War time" explores this phenomenon of violence as a foundational principle of social norms and practices at great length. Unfortunately, the essay is not included in On the Postcolony which also dwells at some length on the development. A few graphic passages demonstrates this. For instance:
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> Where war is still avoided, chaos is descending, the implosion taking the form of general social breakdown. This breakdown feeds on a culture of raiding and booty […]. The result is worsening civil dissension, the ever more frequent resort to ethnically, regionally, or religiously bared mobilization, and the giddying rise in the chances of violent death (2001:50).

What Mbembe terms implosion is fast becoming the general state of affairs. Both the political and economic realms are characterized by forms pertaining to "flight, evasion, dissimilation, subterfuge, devison, a whole range of forms of indiscipline and disobedience" (2001:51). Truly, implosion takes on a variety of forms and so does its levels of operationalisation.

What we have just noted is how implosion occurs at the local level in its widest sense. At the global level, its foundations and structural dimensions are even more daunting than at the local level because it assumes a stifling air of impersonality and also of impenetrability. Mbembe observes:

> In the countries of Africa with economic potential, the general configuration of the market, the industrial base, the structure of relations between the bureaucracy and local business circles and the nature of respective alliances with multinational firms ruled out any possibility either of gaining access to new technologies and new distribution networks or of accumulating any substantial manufacturing know-how or developing an entrepreneurial dynamic that could have helped to respond creatively to the constraints of the world market, as of elsewhere (2001:52).

With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent integration of Eastern Europe into the global system, Africa continues to succumb to forces of disintegration such that it reinforces the reality of its own isolation in the strictest sense. Its alienation ensures that it cannot speak to the world or with the language of the world. Whenever possible, the language of world that trickles down to it is invariably stunted, incomplete and degraded.

Mbembe depicts a picture of Africa and all its numerous brutalities. A state of affairs that shows the various forms entropy can assume. We encounter different manifestations of criminalisation in its statist, economic and social forms. We also encounter the informalisation of economies and its in-built mechanisms for pauperisation and immiserisation. But Mbembe ends the second chapter of his book on a note of hope and with a tendency of social activism,

"With or without international creditors, Africa must face up to the challenge of competitiveness of its economies on the world level" (2001:57).

In the third chapter, Mbembe examines how Africa's exclusion from the centres and forms of international economic activity has created and entrenched new subversive kinds of socio-political organisation. Here, he examines what he terms the "multiple forms of private indirect government". The emergence of new "technologies of domination" in Africa, Mbembe argues, has further caused a greater diminution of the role of the state in the public realm. This very particular form of dissolution of the state is the result of adverse international and local economic factors as well as the vacuum left in the wake of the self-inflicted "defeat of the state" itself. Mbembe notes that "the continent is turning inward on itself in a very serious way" (2001:68). The vacuum created by the dissolution of the state and the way that vacuum is being addressed in collective terms is explained the following manner:

> The upshot is an increase in resources and labor devoted to war, a rise in the number of disputes settled by violence, a growth of banditry, and numerous forms of privatization of lawful violence. Contrary to the assertions of a rather sloppy literature, however, such phenomena are not automatically indicators of chaos. It is important to see in them, also, struggles aimed at establishing new forms of legitimate domination and gradually restructuring formulas of authority built on other foundations (2001:76).

These struggles for the legitimization of new bases of authority definitely have a strong medieval element in them. Most Africans are caught within a number of unstable cosmologies as a result of these competing technologies of domination. What do concepts such as "civil society", "democracy" "public good" "law and order" mean a context submerged in flux, apparent randomness and violent change? One of the major contributions of Mbembe lies in suggesting that those concepts and the languages associated with them in their classical taxonomies mean very little to contemporary Africa which is caught up in internal processes that transform, transcend and evidently subvert them. In a similar vein, he argues that "the future of the state will be settled, as has happened previously in the world, at the point where the three factors of war, coercion and capital (formal or informal, material or symbolic) meet" (2001:77). In essence, Africa may be doomed to experience its own Dark Ages so many centuries after they first appeared on the stage of world history.

African societies are entering a period of statelessness in which "functions supposed to public, and obligations that flow from sovereignty, are increasingly performed by private operators for private ends. Soldiers and policemen live off the inhabitants; officials supposed to perform administrative tasks sell the public service required and pocket what they get" (2001:80). This situation also obtains in the sprawling slums of Brazil where those shanties have had to evolve their own regulatory mechanisms. Just to add to Mbembe's insights, Nigerians in

urban centres have become engulfed by violent struggles and changes over place, space name and belonging. What is an exclusive residential district and what is not? Where does the slum take over and where does it break off? What is civic mindedness and what is the seductive honour of the bandit? What rules are to be established within the ambit of the underground economy and whose responsibility is it to do so? These questions and numerous related ones are thrown up in different contexts, sectors and discourses and with hyphenated and mutilated lexicons. Like children we are learning to speak a language everyone claims to know with a purely individuated insight but without a general grammar. The crux of the matter is do we survive what Mbembe terms "tonton – macoutism"?. Again, Mbembe's boldness lies in affirming that "tonton – macoutization" has become a generalized condition of existence in Africa. Violence and coercion are what determines the fate of individual in postcolonial Africa. As a partial conclusion, Mbembe submits that "what we are witnessing in Africa is clearly the establishment of a different political economy and the invention of new systems of coercion and exploitation" (2001:93).

The edifying part in all this is that the struggle over these new forms of domination is not in the hands of bandits and corrupt bureaucrats alone. As Mbembe points out, "most of the religious and healing movements proliferating in Africa today constitute visible, if ambiguous, sites where new normative systems, new common languages, and the constitution of new authorities are being negotiated" (2001:93).

The third chapter, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity" which is adapted from Mbembe's famous essay, provisional Notes on the Postcolony" is an elaboration of his notion of the postcolony. He explains:

> The notion "postcolony" identifies specifically a given historical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves. To be sure, the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic; it has nonetheless an internal coherence. It is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or reforming stereotypes (2001:102).

The postcolony, just as the colonial order, is established and sustained by a "regime of violence", Mbembe posits that "in the post colony, the commandement seeks to institutionalize itself, to achieve legitimation and hegemony (recherché hégémonique), in the form of a fetish" (2001:103). Even more, "the postcolony is, par excellence, a hallow pretense, a regime of unreality (régime du simulacra)" (2001:108).

The widespread prebendalisation of African postcolonial societies has resulted in the mutual zombification of the dominant and dominated classes. No one within the postcolony is free from its innate grotesqueness, its freewheeling violences and its abilities for rampant fetishisation. Also "the postcolony is a world of anxious virility, a world hostile to continence, frugality, sobriety"

(2001:110). Ensconced within themes of power and coercion is the leitmotif of sexual politics which is itself shot through with the reality of violence.

As a foretaste of the strong sexual current, Mbembe writes, "to exercise authority is above all, to tire out the bodies of those under it, to disempower them not so much as to increase their productivity as to ensure the maximum docility. To exercise authority is, furthermore, for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well, and again labou Tansi's words, to pass most of his time in "pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls" (2001:110).

In this fabulous postcolonial world, symbols and persons of authority are also transformed in objects of ridicule. Mbembe has observed that the postcolony maintains "an economy of death". And one major way to escape from the tyranny of this death is to arm and nourish oneself with the power of humour. This is something Milan Kundera understands so well having survived the realities of totalitarianism in former Czecholovakia. Laughter is a way of forgetting, it is also a way of easing pain. In the postcolony, death, sex, birth, power, pain, filth and incontinence are merged in a seamless and at the same random economy of violence. The dominant could suddenly turn out to be victim and vice versa. According to Mbembe:

> This fact accounts for the baroque character of the postcolony: its unusual and grotesque art of representation, its taste for the theatrical, and its violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness (2001:114).

Extending his discourse on the postcolony Mbembe notes:

> The post colonial polity can only produce "fables" and stupefy its "subjects", bringing on delirum when the discourse of power penetrates its targets and drives them into realms of fantasy and hallucination (2001:18).

So within the postcolony the force and political outgrowths of the commandement lives and reigns. Its unabashed authoritarian character is where the dominant forces of the post colony find both their political and epistemic justification. In a revealing passage, Mbembe comments in the economy that links the post colonial body with the dictates and presence of power:

> In the postcolony, an intimate tyranny links the rulers with the ruled – just as obscenity is only another aspect of munificence, and vulgarity a normal condition of state power.
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> If subjection appears more intense then it might be, this is because the subjects of the commandement have internalized authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of life-social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, styles of dress, rhetorical devises, and the whole political economy of the body (2001:128).

In the following chapter, "The Thing and Its Doubles", Mbembe analyses the epistemological relationship between the visible and the occult and the role of the image within this framework and the criteria for the ascription of value to things and persons. Here, he unearths an interesting problematique in seeing the interconnectedness between what is seen, heard and not seen in a context of social want, denial and scarcity. These disparate elements are fused together by a general economy that owes much to African theories of evil or the paranormal. So as he puts it, "by summoning up the world of shade in a context where there was no forced correspondence between what was seen, heard or said – or between what was and what was not, what was apparent and what partook of the spectre and the phantom – one was appealing to a particular ontology of violence and the phantom" (2001: 145).

This theoretical postulate is reinforced by numerous practical occurrences in everyday life where general societal breakdown is marked by sudden reversals and upturnings of socially accepted norms, where the real becomes the unusual and where the unreal is treated as the accepted norm. In this way, phantasmagoric elements play upon and expand our understanding of the marvelous without necessarily liberating us from its force. In practical terms, "there is overloading of language, overloading of public transport, overloading of living accommodations, beginning with tightly packed homes. Everything lead to excess,, here" (2001:141).

The fear of survival, scarcity, famine, violence and practically everything is central to this pervasive degradation just as all classes of persons are affected from the victim to the victimiser. To prove this point, Mbembe writes "if money is the supreme means of enjoyment, devouring the flesh and organs, and drinking the blood of others, are clear demonstrations of how the loci of power are also loci of danger, alienation, and slow death" (2001:160). It is interesting to note that in exploring the logics (or illogicalities) by which relationships that go into the constitution of the marvelous are assembled, Mbembe uses a copious amount of newspaper cartoons to project even more sharply the effects all these have in everyday life.

In the next chapter, Mbembe continues his analyses of what he terms the spirit of violence. Again, we are reminded of how colonialism itself and the constitution of the African consciousness in Western discourse were events that had violence as its founding principle. Also, black sexuality and attributes foisted upon it by Eurocentric biases and the lingering effects of the commandement in its post colonial colouring were shrouded by a spirit of violence. Mbembe here, explores the phallus and its elaborate demonisation, its disorienting symbolisms, and its transformation into any object of menace, fear and arbitrariness. Beyond this demonology is the process of colonization of which Mbembe writes, "a miraculous act, the act of colonizing is one of the most complete expressions of the form of arbitrariness that is the arbitrariness of desire and whim. The pure terror of desire and whim – that is its concept"

(2001:189). However, the reign of desire and whim continues after its arbitrary constructions of the mentalities of the slave and also the master. In other words, the postcolony thrives on an epistemology that does unhidden violence to the consciousness.

Africans in the postcolony are compelled to confront the forms of death and violences that dominate their cosmologies. According to Mbembe the African ought to ask himself/herself, "who are you in the world?" to which the answer is " I am an ex-slave". He has also taken pains to establish that there is no difference between the slave and a native. Thus the native's struggle against "the grammar of animality" to which history has condemned him/her. His/hers is also a struggle against the aesthetics of vulgarity and/or obscenity in its starkest form.

Achille Mbembe accomplishes the aesthetisation of vulgarity in relation to the African predicament but he also succeeds in maintaining the poise of a philosopher. No doubt, a difficult thing to achieve in view of the predominant and corrupting dynamics of vulgarity. How can we avoid getting submerged by the mire as we stand contemplating its tremendous force? Mbembe's discourses are stylized products of force that perhaps only the African postcolony is capable of producing. They survive the forces of violence through their very own transformative will, through their own deliberate mode of aesthetisation and principles of construction.

In so doing, the text as an instrument of understanding, interpretation and communication comes to encompass all its various possibilities – it is both and aural, written and implicit, it has visual and sensory attributes and it is both oral fabulous and factual. Mbembe appropriates this definition of the text and makes it his own.

On the Postcolony is a polyphonous elaboration of the new forms of death and violence emerging within the African postcolony. It also a brave exploration of the possibilities available for transcending them. Through this text, we are able to learn about new ways of speaking about our continental embarrassments and miseries from a positionality that turns us out of ourselves, that lays out much broader trajectories for our subjectification and finally that inscribes our existence in a much wider field of human experience.

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