

THE BANALITY OF POWER AND THE AESTHETICS OF VULGARITY IN THE POSTCOLONY

ACHILLE MBEMBE

Translated by Janet Roitman

In this article, I will examine the banality of power in the “postcolony.”¹ By “banality of power,” I am not simply referring to the way bureaucratic formalities or arbitrary rules, implicit or explicit, have been multiplied, nor am I simply concerned with what has become routine. To be sure, banality implies predictability precisely because it is made up of repeated daily actions and gestures. Yet, by the “banality of power” I am also evoking those elements of the obscene, vulgar, and the grotesque that Mikhail Bakhtin claimed to have located in “non-official”² cultures, but which, in

¹ This article was written in French, for presentation at a panel organised by J.I. Guyer for the meeting of the African Studies Association at Atlanta, Georgia, in November 1989. The subject of the panel was “Idioms of power and accumulation.” K. Fields and P. Geschiere commented on the first version. Mamadou Diouf, V.Y. Mudimbe, P. Chabal, and B. Jewsiewicki read the second version. Otherwise, I have benefitted from the suggestions of M.G. Schatzberg, R. Bjornson, M. Taussig, R. Lemarchand, and J.I. Guyer before arriving at this final and substantially revised text. M. Last saw that it was translated into English. Janet Roitman admirably took on this task.

² I have in mind his understanding of the way in which “non-official” cultures invert and desecrate “official” values in carnivalesque activities. Cf. M. Bakhtin, *L'oeuvre de Rabelais et la culture populaire du Moyen-Age et sous la Renaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). For a recent critique, see R. Lachmann, “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture,” *Cultural Critique* (Winter 1987–1989), 115–152.

fact, are intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed.

The notion "postcolony" simply refers to the specific identity of a given historical trajectory: that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization. To be sure, the postcolony is a chaotic plurality, yet it has nonetheless an internal coherence. It is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or of stereotypes. It is not, however, just an economy of signs in which power is mirrored and *imagined* self-reflectively. The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive art of improvisation, by a tendency to excess and disproportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation.³ It is likewise made up of a series of corporate institutions, and apparatuses which, once they are deployed, constitute a distinctive regime of violence.⁴ In this sense, the postcolony is a critical and dramatic site in which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, indiscipline.

With respect to trajectories of this type, then, I am concerned with the ways in which state power:

1) *creates*, through its administrative and bureaucratic practices, a world of meanings all of its own, a mastercode which, in aiming for a primary centrality, also, and perhaps paradoxically, governs the logics of the constitution of all other meanings within these societies.

2) attempts to institutionalize its world of meanings as a "socio-historical world,"⁵ and to make that world fully real, turning it into a part of people's common sense not only by instilling it in the minds of its *cibles* (or "target population"),⁶ but also in the imaginary of an époque.

³ This is well attested in the contemporary African novel. In the words of S. Labou Tansi, the postcolony is the place where "l'indépendance, ça n'est pas costaud costaud." *La vie et demie* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 41. Other examples of this insight into the postcolony are found in the same author's *Les yeux du volcan* (Paris: Seuil, 1988). Also, Ibrahima Ly, *Toiles d'araignées* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1982).

⁴ See Achille Mbembe, "Pouvoir, violence et accumulation," *Politique Africaine* 39 (1990). See also the special issues of *Politique Africaine* devoted to "the power to kill," 2, no. 7 (1982) and "violence and power," 42 (June 1991). Otherwise, consult C. Geffray, *La cause des armes au Mozambique. Anthropologie d'une guerre civile* (Paris: Karthala, 1990).

⁵ I owe this manner of problematization to C. Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 475.

⁶ I use the notion of *cible* in the sense indicated by Michel Foucault when, in response to the question of "what constitutes the art of governing," he delineated objects of power

The basic argument of this article is that, to account for both the imagery and efficacy of postcolonial relations of power, we must go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination (resistance/passivity, subjection/autonomy, state/civil society, hegemony/counterhegemony, totalization/detotalization). These oppositions are not helpful;⁷ rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations.⁸ In the postcolony, the *commandement*⁹ seeks to institutionalize itself, in order to achieve legitimation and hegemony [*recherche hégémonique*], in the form of a *fetish*.¹⁰ The signs, vocabulary, and narratives that it produces are not only destined to become objects of representation. They are officially

as, on the one hand, a territory and, on the other hand, the people who live in the territory, or the population. *Cible* is thus used to designate “the people who live” the postcolony. For details, see M. Foucault, “La gouvernementalité,” *Magazine Littéraire* 269 (1989). [The overly literal translation, “target population,” will be hereafter indicated by the shorthand “subjects.” Translator’s note.]

⁷ On these complex questions, cf. J.-F. Bayart, “L’énunciation du politique,” *Revue française de science politique* 35 (1985), 343–373.

⁸ The poverty of the hypotheses which guide a number of studies is, in this regard, telling in that the question posed by such research is limited to the problem of knowing whether the acts they describe and interpret are inscribed or not in a process of either resistance or accommodation to the established order; of “engagement” or “disengagement” with respect to the field of domination; or, more crudely, if such movements are “conservative” or “progressive.” For some examples of recent efforts to overcome these impasses, read V. Azarya and N. Chazan, “Disengagement from the State in Africa: Reflections on the Experience of Ghana and Guinea,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 1 (1987), 106–131; the pieces presented in D. Rothchild and N. Chazan (eds.), *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987). Some of the limitations to these works are made evident by J.L. Roitman, “The Politics of Informal Markets in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 28, no. 4 (1990), 671–696. Otherwise, refer to J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁹ I am using the term *commandement* in the way it was used to denote colonial authority. That is, insofar as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them without, of course, discussing them. Hence, the notion of “commandement” is used here to refer to the authoritarian modality *par excellence*. On the colonial theorization of this mode, read, for example, R. Delavignette, *Freedom and Authority in French West Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1968); or, more generally, W.B. Cohen, *Rulers of Empire* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1971). [The French term will be retained in the text. Translator’s note.]

¹⁰ On the notion of the “fetish” as applied in the African context, cf. the special issue of the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 2 (1970), entitled “Objets du fétichisme.” Of particular interest are the contributions of J. Pouillon, A. Adler, and P. Bonnafé, 131–194.

invested with a surplus of meanings which are not negotiable, and which one is thus officially forbidden to transgress. So as to insure that such transgression does not in fact take place, the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas; they select a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts;¹¹ but they also have resort to the systematic application of pain,¹² the basic goal being the production of an imagery. To account for postcolonial relations is thus to pay attention to the workings of power in its minute details, and to the principles of assemblage which give rise to its efficacy. That is, one must examine the orderings of the world it produces; the types of institutions, knowledges, norms, and practices that issue from it; the manner in which these institutions, knowledges, norms, and practices structure the *quotidien*; as well as the light that the use of visual imagery and discourse throws on the nature of domination and subordination.

The focus of my analysis is Cameroon. As a case study, it demonstrates how the grotesque and the obscene are two essential characteristics that identify postcolonial regimes of domination. Bakhtin claims that the grotesque and the obscene are, above all, a matter of plebeian life. He maintains that, as a means of resistance to the dominant culture and as a refuge from it, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies which undermine officialdom by exposing its arbitrary and perishable character, turning it all into a figure of fun.¹³ But, while this view is not totally invalid, the answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this article, require a shift of perspective such that the grotesque and the obscene can also be located in 1) the places and times in which state power organizes the dramatization of its magnificence, 2) the displays in which it stages its majesty and prestige and, 3) the way it offers these artifacts to its "targets" [*cibles*].

¹¹ See, in respect to Zaïre, T.M. Callaghy, "Culture and Politics in Zaïre," unpub. m.s., October 1986.

¹² See the examples documented by M.G. Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaïre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹³ This point is demonstrated in M. Bristol's recent study of the carnival in England during the Renaissance. Cf. *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985). For other commentaries, refer to A. Falassi (ed.), *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); and D.A. Poole, "Accommodation and Resistance in Andean Ritual Dance," *The Drama Review* 34, no. 2 (1990), 98–126.

It is only through such a shift in perspective that we can come to understand that the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration, but is rather best characterized as a promiscuous relationship: a convivial tension between the *commandement* and its “targets.” It is precisely this logic of familiarity and domesticity that explains the fact that acts of the dominated do not necessarily lead to resistance, accommodation, “disengagement,” the refusal to be captured,¹⁴ or to an antagonism between public facts and gestures and those *sous maquis* [of the underground]. Instead, it has resulted in the mutual “zombification” of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate. This “zombification” means that each robbed the other of their vitality and has left them both impotent [*impouvoir*].

Indeed, the examples in this article suggest that the postcolony is made up not of one coherent “public space,” nor is it determined by any single organizing principle. It is rather a plurality of “spheres” and arenas, each having its own separate logic yet nonetheless liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain specific contexts: hence the postcolonial “subject” has had to learn to continuously bargain [*marchander*] and improvise. Faced with this plurality of legitimizing rubrics, institutional forms, rules, arenas, and principles of combination, the postcolonial “subject” mobilizes not just a single “identity,” but several fluid identities which, by their very nature, must be constantly “revised” in order to achieve maximum instrumentality and efficacy as and when required.¹⁵

If there is, then, a “postcolonial subject,” he or she is publicly visible only at the point where the two activities overlap — on one hand, in the common daily rituals that ratify the *commandement*'s own institutionalization (its *recherche hégémonique*) in its capacity as a fetish¹⁶ to which the subject is bound; and, on the other, the subject's deployment of a talent for play and a sense of fun which makes him *homo ludens par excellence*. It is

¹⁴ Here, I have in mind G. Hyden's *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

¹⁵ This is amply demonstrated in the works of S. Berry. Cf., for example, “The Significance of Investment: Farmers, Strategies and Agrarian Change in Africa.” Paper presented to the conference on “Identity, Rationality and the Post-colonial Subject: African Perspectives on Contemporary Social Theory,” Columbia University, New York, 28 February 1991.

¹⁶ Understood as the institutionalized forms adopted by a regime of domination in seeking to legitimize violent practices.

this practice, as *homo ludens*, that enables subjects to splinter their identities and to represent themselves as constantly changing their persona; they are constantly undergoing mitosis,¹⁷ whether it be in “official” spaces or not. Thus, it seems that one would be mistaken to continue to interpret the post-colonial relation in terms of “resistance” or absolute “domination,” or as a function of the dichotomies and binary oppositions generally adduced in conventional analyses of movements of indiscipline and insubordination¹⁸ (counter-discourses, counter-society, counter-hegemony, second society).

EXCESS AND THE CREATIVITY OF ABUSE¹⁹

This manner of proceeding — like the questions which are at stake — requires a few additional explanatory remarks. To begin with, there is the question of the grotesque and obscene being used as means of erecting, ratifying, or deconstructing particular regimes of violence and domination. In a study devoted to what has been termed “political derision” in Togo, C. Toulabor shows how, under one-party rule, the people developed ways of separating words or phrases off from their conventional meanings, giving them second significances. He also illustrates how, in this manner, they created an ambiguous, or equivocal, vocabulary parallel to the official discourse.²⁰ Until recently, Togo was the perfect example of a postcolonial construction. The official discourse made use of all necessary means to maintain the fiction of a society devoid of conflict. Here, “postcoloniality” was glimpsed behind the façade of an entity — that is, state power — which

¹⁷ I am indebted to Susan Roitman for this apt metaphor. Personal communication, 24 August 1991.

¹⁸ This simplistic dichotomy is taken up by J. Scott in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcript* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). It also strongly marks recent East European sociological work. See, for example, E. Hankiss, “The ‘Second Society’: Is There an Alternative Social Model Emerging in Contemporary Hungary?” *Social Research* 55, nos. 1–2 (1988). Binary categories are likewise to be found in J. Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁹ The subtitle derives partly from D. Parkin, “The Creativity of Abuse,” *Man* (N.S.) 15 (1980), 45. The author uses the term in the context of ritualized verbal exchanges, whereas I am taking it to interpret more strictly defined political situations.

²⁰ C. Toulabor, “Jeu de mots, jeux de vilain. Lexique de la dérision politique au Togo,” *Politique Africaine* 3 (1981), 55–71. And see also his *Togo sous Eyadéma* (Paris: Karthala, 1986), notably 302–309.

considered itself as simultaneously indistinguishable from society and as the upholder of the law and the keeper of the truth. State power was embodied in a single person: the President. He alone controlled the law and could, on his own, grant or abolish liberties. In similar vein, in Cameroon, the Head of State can publicly declare: "I brought you to liberty.... You now have liberty. Make good use of it."²¹

In Togo, the single-party, *Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais* (R.P.T), claimed to control the totality of public and social life, subjecting it to the pursuit of what were decreed to be communal goals and proclaiming the unity of the people among whom no divisions could be allowed to exist. In this context, all dissidence was denied, if it had not already been repressed administratively or forcibly killed off. However, even though one would expect to find a society deprived of its resources, a dissociation persisted between, on the one hand, the representation that State power projected of itself and society and, on the other hand, the way in which the ordinary people played with and manipulated this representation not just well away from officialdom, out of earshot, out of sight of power,²² but also within the actual arenas where they were gathered publicly to confirm the legitimacy of the State.

Thus there were avenues of escape from the *commandement*, and whole areas of social discourse eluded control in a discontinuous and uninterrupted manner. Verbal acts of this kind offer some good examples — and are excellent indices of what can be considered commonplace (and hence banal). For instance, when Togolese were called upon to shout the party slogans, many would travesty the metaphors meant to glorify state power. With a simple change in intonation, the same metaphor could take on several meanings. Thus, under the cover of official slogans people sang about the sudden erection of the "enormous" and "rigid" presidential phallus, of how it remains in this position, and of its contact with "vaginal fluids." "The powerful key of Eyadéma penetrates the keyhole. People, 'applaud!'" "Eat your portion, Paul Biya," echoed the Cameroonians, making allusion to the

²¹ *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4778, 4 décembre 1990, 11, translator's translation. [All excerpts from French news sources will hereafter be understood to be the translator's renderings. Translator's note.]

²² Read, in this respect, M. Schatzberg's analysis of the State as "eye" and "ear" in *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

intensified prebendalization²³ of their state since 1982 when Mr. Ahidjo resigned and was replaced constitutionally by his former Prime Minister. The “poaching” of meanings can go much farther. For example, the Togolese party acronym (R.P.T.), was identified with “the sound of faecal matter dropping into a septic tank” or “the sound of a fart emitted by quivering buttocks” which “can only smell disgusting.”²⁴ “Cut it up and dole it out!” [*redépécer*]²⁵ was preferred by Cameroonians, who thus gave another meaning to the name of the former sole party, the R.D.P.C. (Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais) and in this way incorporated the state within the imaginary of the belly and eating, the right of capture and the redistribution of spoils — all these being metaphors common in local vernaculars of power.²⁶

Ultimately, the obsession with orifices and genital organs came to dominate Togolese popular laughter. But the same is also to be found in writings and speech in other Sub-Saharan countries. For example, the Congolese author, Sony Labou Tansi, repeatedly describes the “strong, delivering, thick thighs” and “the essential and bewitching ass” of girls not only in the context of his reflections on “the tropicalities of his Excellency” and on the ability of the latter to bring about a “digital orgasm,” but also in his insistence on the irony involved in the momentary impotence of the autocrat’s “natural member”:

The Providential Guide went to the toilet for a final verification of his weapons. There, he undressed.... For this woman ... he intended to proceed with long and deep penetrations, interrupted by foamy come, like he did when he was young. But, because of the disorder in his loins, he could no longer turn inside them to make them wet. He could no longer produce that special sensation of air being pumped by the pistons of a motor [*pétaradants*], or of spurts of flowing liquid [*cataractes*], or the effect of a stopper, or a plug [*bouchons*]. Old age had dealt him a nasty blow from below, so to speak. But he was still a dignified

²³ For a case study of the specificity of this notion, cf. R. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁴ For another instance of poaching on the rhetorical territories of a pseudo-revolutionary regime — this time Burkina Faso under Sankara — consult C. Dubuch, “Langage du pouvoir, pouvoir du langage,” *Politique Africaine* 20 (1985), 44–53.

²⁵ The sense of dismemberment is the essence of this verb. Translator’s note.

²⁶ See J.-F. Bayart, *L’Etat en Afrique. La Politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

male, still even a male who could perform, able to rise and fall — achieving undulation [*les ondulants*], among other things.²⁷

The emphasis on orifices and protuberances has to be understood in relation to two factors especially. The first derives from the fact that the *commandement* in the postcolony has a marked taste for lecherous living. In this respect, ceremonies and festivities are the two key vehicles for indulging the taste. But the language of its forms and symbols is above all the mouth, the penis, and the belly.²⁸ One must, moreover, understand this language from the point of view of postcolonial *gouvernementalité*:²⁹ it is not enough to bring into play the mouth, the penis, or the belly, or merely to refer to them in order to automatically produce obscenity. The mouth, the penis, and the belly — as structuring principles as well as objects of verbal acts and popular laughter — are in fact given multiple and ambivalent meanings. They are called upon to comment on various aspects of social life — a relationship to time, to play, and pleasure. In short, they are mobilized by those who want to make a statement about human existence and the ordering of society, death, inequality, or “witchcraft.” In this sense, they serve as primary referents or critical metaphors in the production of the political in the postcolony.

But beyond the particular sites represented by the mouth, the belly, and the penis, the principal locus of both the self-narration of power and the places in which it imagines itself is the body. And yet, if, as we have just indicated, ceremonies and festivities constitute the pre-eminent means by which the *commandement* speaks and the way in which it dramatizes its magnificence and prodigality, then the body to which we are referring is, foremost, the body that eats and drinks, and which (in both cases) is thus open. Hence the significance of orifices — and the central part they play in popular laughter.

Togolese references to the “loud fart” or “faecal material,” the Cameroonians reiteration of *redépeçage*, or the oft-cited “goat that grazes

²⁷ S. Labou Tansi, *La vie et demie*, 42. Read also 55–6 and 68.

²⁸ On the anthropological significance of “the belly” in Southern Cameroon, see L. Maillart Guimera, *Ni dos ni ventre* (Paris: Société d’Ethnologie, 1981). For a political interpretation of the same metaphor, cf. J.-F. Bayart, *L’Etat en Afrique* (Paris: Fayard, 1989); or, *op. cit.*

²⁹ On this notion, cf. M. Foucault, “La gouvernementalité,” *Magazine Littéraire* 269 (1989).

where it is tethered” are all recalling the mouth and the belly at the same time as they are also celebrating the great feasts of food and drink that set the pattern not only of official banquets but also of the more banal yet still major occasions of daily life — such as the purchase of traditional titles, weddings, promotions and appointments, the awarding of medals. The obesity of men in power, their impressive physique and, more prosaically, the flow of shit which results from such a physique — these appeal to a people who can enjoy themselves with mockery and laughter, and, sometimes, even join in the feast. They thus become themselves part of a system of signs that the *commandement* leaves, like tracks, as it passes on its way, and so make it possible to reconstruct the times and places in which it attempts to colonize the common people’s imaginary. And, because of this, one can find those signs reproduced, recurring even in the remotest, tiniest corners of everyday life — in relations between parents and children, between husbands and wives, between police and their victims, teachers and pupils.

Is the ultimate question for the postcolonial *homo ludens*, then, one of “parodying,” or “deriding,” the *commandement*, as the interpretive categories put forth by Bakhtin would have it? To a large extent, popular bursts of hilarity are actually taking the official world seriously; that is to say, at face value or at least the value officialdom itself gives it.³⁰ In the end, whether the encounter is “masked” or not is of little consequence. What is important is that, as a specific trajectory of domination, the postcolony strikes precisely in its earthiness and its verbosity. In fact, the *commandement* derives its “aesthetics” from its immoderate appetite and the immense pleasure that it encounters in plunging in ordure. The sodomite gesture readily goes hand in hand with the orgy and buffoonery. The body of the despot, his frowns and smiles, his decrees and edicts, the redundancy of his public notices and communiqués repeated over and again: these are the primary signifiers. It is these that have force, that get interpreted and re-interpreted, and feed back further significance into the system.

The question of knowing whether comic performance in the postcolony is an expression of “resistance” or not — or if it is, *a priori*, an “opposition” or the manifestation of hostility toward state power — is, then, a secondary question for the time being. For the most part, people who laugh are only reading the signs left like rubbish in the wake of the *commandement*. Thus,

³⁰ This is starkly evident in the colonial African novel. Read, for example, the classic F. Oyono, *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (Paris, 1957).

the president's anus of which they speak is not a solar anus. What the people see and experience is a concrete anus, capable of defecating like any commoner's. And what amuses the populace is the fact that, in its glorious foolishness and indifference to all veracity, the official monologism claims the contrary.

Confrontation occurs the moment that the rulers compel obedience and define, in a constraining manner, what they prefer the ruled to simulate. The problem here is not that they do not obey (nor even pretend to obey). Conflict arises from the fact that the postcolony is a chaotic plurality. And, as such, it leaves an enormous space open to improvisation. In other words, it is practically impossible to enclose its system of signs, images, and traces in fixity and inertia. That is why they are constantly recaptured and reshaped — as much by the rulers as by the ruled — in the refabulization of power.³¹

This is why, too, the postcolony is the simulacral regime *par excellence*. Indeed, by freeing up the potential for play, improvisation, and amusement, within the very limits set by officialdom, the simulacrum allows ordinary people to a) simulate adherence to the innumerable official rituals that life in the postcolony requires (such as the wearing of uniforms or the carrying of the party card, performing public gestures of support for the autocrat, posting portraits of the despot in one's home); and b) thus avoid the annoyances which necessarily arise from frontal opposition to the orders of power and its decrees.

And yet, having interpreted the prevalence of orifices and protuberances in popular laughter in function of the fact that the postcolonial *commandement* is of a luxurious temperament, I must quickly add that the essential point would be lost if one reduced these gestures, and the manner in which they are recharged with sense in popular hilarity, to an ensemble of primitive customs. Rather, I would argue that defecation, copulation, pomp and sumptuousness are all classical ingredients in the production of power, and that there is nothing specifically African about it. That is why I must now insist on another aspect of my argument. I would go further: the obsession with orifices has to be seen as due to the fact that in the postcolony the

³¹ See, for example, the accounts of the use of familial and parental metaphors in Zaïre, and in Cameroon under the regime of M. Ahmadou Ahidjo, in M. Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaïre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Or, more recently, his "Power, Language and Legitimacy in Africa," Paper presented at the conference on "Identity, Rationality and the Post-colonial Subject: African Perspectives on Contemporary Social Theory," Columbia University, New York, 28 February 1991.

commandement is constantly engaged in projecting an image both of itself and of the world — a fantasy that it presents to its subjects as a truth that is beyond dispute, a truth that has to be instilled into them in order that they acquire a habit of discipline and obedience.³² The *commandement* itself aspires to be a cosmogony. Yet owing to its very oddity, it is this “order of the world,” in its eccentricity, that popular laughter causes to capsize, often quite unintentionally.

What gives rise to conflict is not the frequent references to the genital organs of the men of power; but rather the way in which the people who laugh kidnap power and force it, as if by accident, to contemplate its own vulgarity. In other words, in the postcolony, the very display of grandeur and prestige always entails an aspect of vulgarity and the baroque that the official order tries hard to hide,³³ but which ordinary people bring to its attention — sometimes intentionally, often unwittingly. The following incident from Kenya shows how, in practice, the baroque can go well beyond the limits of fun:

A woman from Busia was recently exposed to an agonizing experience as she helplessly watched the police beat her husband with their batons. As she wept and pleaded with the police to spare her husband, the police ordered the couple to take off their shoes. According to the police, the man was punished for failing to stand to attention while the national flag was being lowered. The incident took place last Tuesday, 6 February 1990 at a roadblock on the Kisumu-Busia road. The woman and her husband were sitting on the side of the road, waiting for transport to take them back to Busia.³⁴

It is with the conscious aim of avoiding such trouble that people locate the fetish of state power in the realm of the ridicule; there, they can tame it, or shut it up and render it powerless. Once having symbolically bridled its capacity to annoy [*capacité de nuisance*], they can then enclose it in the status of an idol. But we are then dealing with a congenial idol that is

³² See D. Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1989).

³³ I am extrapolating, for my own purposes, from an argument developed in another context by E. Tonkin, “Masks and Powers,” *Man* (N.S.) 14 (1979), 237–248.

³⁴ See the full account in “Police beat up man over flag,” *The Standard*, no. 23547, 8 February 1990, 1–2.

familiar and intimate and which is, henceforth, part of the domesticity of the dominant as much as the dominated.³⁵

This double act of both distancing and domesticating is not necessarily the expression of a fundamental conflict between worlds of meaning which are in principle antagonistic. In fact, officialdom and the people share many references in common, not the least of which is a certain conception of the aesthetics and stylistics of power, the way it operates and the modalities of its expansion. Hence, for example, the *commandement* has to be extravagant since, apart from feeding itself, it also has to feed its clientele. Likewise, it must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its status, displaying the heights of luxury in matters of dress and lifestyle, thereby turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theatre.³⁶ Similarly, it must proceed by extraction — through taxes and different levies, rents of various kinds, forcible confiscation and other ways of siphoning off wealth. As S. Labou Tansi notes, special teams

come to collect taxes twice a year, they demand a head tax, a land tax, a levy on children, a levy to show faith in the Guide, a contribution for economic recovery, a travel tax, the patriotism levy, the militants' contribution, the levy for the War against Ignorance, the levy for soil conservation, the hunting tax.³⁷

The actions that signal sovereignty have to be carried through with an adequately harsh firmness, otherwise the splendor of those exercising the trappings of authority is dimmed. To exercise authority is above all to tire out the bodies of those under it, to “disempower” them not so much in an effort to make them economically productive as to render them docile. To command is, moreover, to publicly demonstrate a certain delight in eating and drinking well and, as S. Labou Tansi shows, to pass most of one's

³⁵ On this intimacy and domesticity (the way in which the “fetish” adheres to the corporality of the citizens, decorates their houses, invades the stadiums, marks clothing, is flattered and nourished in songs; in short, colonizes all the paths of everyday life), read the comments of J.M. Ela, *Quand l'Etat pénètre en brousse* (Paris: Karthala, 1990), 52–58.

³⁶ Compare this ostentatious consumption to the ethos of prestige and the system of courtly expenditure in the society of Europe as revealed by N. Elias in, *La société de cour*, tr. P. Kamnitzer et J. Etoré (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 47–61. See also the following chapter on the etiquette and logic of prestige, 63–114.

³⁷ S. Labou Tansi, *La vie et demie*, 122.

time in “pissing grease and rust into the backsides of young girls.”³⁸ Pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, with sexual rights over subordinates [*droit de cuissage*], the keeping of concubines, and so forth. And the unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one of the pillars of the phallographic cycle.

It seems, then, that one can reasonably conclude from these preliminary remarks that the postcolony is a world of anxious virility — hostile to continence, frugality, and sobriety. Furthermore, the set of images, idioms, and legitimizing rubrics evoked above is shared and used as much by those we designate as dominant as by the dominated. Those who laugh, whether they do so in the public arena or under cloak in the “private sphere,” are not necessarily “bringing power down” or even “resisting” it. Confronted with the state’s eagerness to cover up its vulgar origins, people are simply bearing witness, often unconsciously, to the fact that the grotesque is no more foreign to officialdom than the common (*wo*)man is impervious to the charms of majesty.

Indeed, in its own longing for grandeur the popular world borrows the whole ideological repertoires of officialdom, along with its idioms and forms. Conversely, the official world mimics popular vulgarity, inserting it at the very core of the procedures by which it claims to rise to grandeur. It is unnecessary, then, to do as Bakhtin does and insist on oppositions [*dédouplements*]³⁹ or, as conventional analysis has it, on the purported logic of resistance, disengagement, or disjunction.⁴⁰ Instead the emphasis should be upon the logics of conviviality, on the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, which inscribe the dominant and the dominated in the same epistemological field.

What distinguishes the postcolony from other regimes of violence and domination, then, is not only the luxuriousness of style and the down-to-earth realism that characterizes its power or even the fact that it is exercised “in the raw” [*à l’état brut*]. Peculiar also to the postcolony is the fact that the forging of relations between those who command and their subjects operates, fundamentally, through a specific pragmatic: the simulacrum. This

³⁸ S. Labou Tansi, *Les yeux du volcan* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 98.

³⁹ A point well argued by P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), especially 26.

⁴⁰ As does, for example, J. Scott, “Prestige as the Public Discourse of Domination,” *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989), 145–166.

explains why dictators can go to sleep at night lulled by roars of adulation and support [*motions de soutien*] only to wake up the next morning to find their golden calves smashed and their tablets of law overturned. The applauding crowds of yesterday have become today a cursing, abusive mob. That is to say, people whose identities have been partly confiscated have been able, precisely because there was this pretense [*simulacre*], to glue back together the bits of and pieces of their fragmented identities. And by annexing official signs and languages, they make use of them to refabulate their own universe of sense while “zombifying,” or preying on, the *commandement*. Strictly speaking, this process does not increase either the depth of people’s subordination or their levels of resistance; it simply produces a situation of disempowerment [*impouvoir*] for both the ruled and the rulers.⁴¹ This process is, fundamentally, of a magical nature. Though it may demystify the *commandement* or even erode its supposed legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement*’s material base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe, though otherwise it glides unperturbed over them.

As I noted above, the *commandement* defines itself as a cosmogony or, more simply, a fetish. A fetish is, among other things, an object which aspires to sacralization; it demands power and seeks to maintain an intimate and proximate relationship with those who carry it.⁴² Fetish can also take the form of a talisman which one can call upon, honour, or dread. In the postcolony, the power of the fetish is invested not only in the figure of the autocrat, but also in all figures of the *commandement* and its agents (the Party, policement, soldiers, administrators and officials, courtiers and traffickers, militiamen). It turns the postcolonial autocrat into an object of representation that feeds upon applause, flattery, and lies. By virtue of its exercising power in the raw [*à l’état brut*], the fetish — as embodied in the autocrat and his agents — takes on itself an autonomous existence. It becomes unaccountable or, in the words of Hegel, capriciousness that has reached the contemplation of itself.⁴³ If so, we should not underestimate the

⁴¹ See, from this perspective, J.D. Gandalou’s description of the “sapeurs” of Congo Brazzaville in, *Dandies à Bacongo. Le culte de l’élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1989).

⁴² See M. Coquet, “Une esthétique du fétiche,” *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire*, Cahier 8 (1985), 111–138.

⁴³ Cf. F. Hegel, *La raison dans l’histoire* (Paris: Plon, 1965).

violence that can be set in motion to protect the vocabulary used to denote the *commandement* or to speak to it, and to safeguard the official fictions that underwrite the apparatus of domination⁴⁴ — since these are essential to keeping the people under the spell of the *commandement*, within an enchanted forest of adulation⁴⁵ that at the same time makes people laugh.

For, if it is a matter of playing and amusement for the ruled, the rulers are consumed, rather, by the question of fabricating and imposing an imaginary. What for the ruled may seem funny is nonetheless treated by the powerful as sacrilege (as in the case of the Kenyan couple who failed to honour the flag). In this context laughter or mere indifference is blasphemous, not because people intend it so but because those in power consider it blasphemous. Categories, however, like blasphemy or sacrilege are inadequate to convey the sense of eating [*dévoration*] that is clearly involved here. This is so, because, if we follow Bakhtin and thus accept (even provisionally) that carnivalesque praxis attacks a cosmology and creates a myth whose central subject is the body, we have to conclude that what we have in the post-colony is a case of theophagy⁴⁶ where the god himself is devoured by his worshippers.

In those operations, the totem that acts as a double to power is no longer protected by taboo.⁴⁷ There is a breach in the wall of prohibitions. In transgressing taboos and interdictions, people are stressing their preference for conviviality. They unpack the officialese and its protective taboos and, often unwittingly, tear apart the gods that African autocrats aspire to be. In this way an image such as that of the presidential anus is brought down to earth; it becomes nothing more than a common-or-garden arse [*un anus bien du terroir*] that defecates like anyone else's. So too the penis of His Excellency

⁴⁴ An example is the case against M. Célestin Monga and the newspaper, *Le Messager*, for having allegedly "insulted the Head of State" in January-February 1991.

⁴⁵ Refer to what M. Bakhtin calls the "official monologism," or the naïve pretention to possess "a whole truth," in *La poétique de Dostoïevski* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 155.

⁴⁶ I reappropriate, at my own risk, an interpretive rubric taken from Greek mythology: the case of the dismemberment of Dionysius by his mother and other women, which was undertaken according to a specific ritual. For more details, cf. J. Kott, *The Eating of the Gods: An Interpretation of Greek Tragedy*, tr. B. Taborski and E. Czerwinski (New York: Random House, 1970). For a similar dramatization, see also G. Bataille, *Death and Sensuality. A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962).

⁴⁷ S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

turns out to be no more than a peasant's [*un pénis bien du pays*], unable to resist, amidst the aromas of everyday life, the scent of women.

However, if ordinary people can — even inadvertently — dismember and devour the gods the autocrats aspire to be, the converse is also true. This is shown by the following account of the public execution of two malefactors in Cameroon:

At dawn on August 28th ... they were taken to the "Carrefour des Billes" along the main Douala to Yaounde road (where) they saw the crowd. Apart from the local population — totalling several hundred people — there were the authorities: the Governor of the Littoral province, the Prefect of Wouri, the Public Prosecutor, the Deputy Prefect, the officer in command of the G.M.I. squadron, the Governor of Douala central prison, a priest, a doctor, one of their lawyers..., several militiamen and policemen, soldiers impeccably dressed in combat gear, firemen.

In the military bus that drove them to the place of execution, they were brought food. They refused to take their last meal, preferring to drink instead. They were given whisky and red wine which they rapidly drained.... At seven o'clock..., they were taken to the stakes, which were set about ten meters apart. While Oumbé let himself be tied up, Njomzeu continued to struggle ... He was forced to his knees. When it came to his turn, he broke down and started to cry.... The priest and the pastor who were there came up and called on them to pray. To no avail.

The soldiers who were to carry out the execution — there were twenty-four of them, twelve for each man — advanced in line, marching in step under the command of a captain and came to a halt at thirty metres range: twelve kneeling, twelve standing. At the command of the captain: "Ready!" the soldiers cocked their rifles and took aim. "Fire!": a short, terrible burst drowned the cries of the condemned. Twelve bullets moving at 800 metres per second. Then the *coup de grâce*. And, incredible but true, the crowd broke into frenzied applause, as if it was the end of a good show.⁴⁸

We could use here, since the situation is not dissimilar, the narrative structure that Michel Foucault employed in his account of the punishment of Damians.⁴⁹ But we must not forget that the case above occurred in a post-colony. That does not imply that the postcolonial rationale bears no

⁴⁸ This account is from *La Gazette* (Douala), no. 589, September 1987.

⁴⁹ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 9–11.

relationship to the “colonial rationale.”⁵⁰ Indeed, the colony had its own arsenal of punishments and devices for disciplining the “natives.” At its most vicious, the native’s body was fastened by an iron collar, as was the practice with convicts in the Cour de Bicêtre, with the neck bent back over an anvil.⁵¹ The colony also had its convicts.⁵² “Coloniality,” as a power relation based on violence, was meant to cure Africans of their supposed laziness, protecting them from need whether or not they wanted such protection. Given the degeneracy and vice which from the colonial viewpoint characterized the indigenous world, colonialism found it necessary to rein in the abundant sexuality of the “negro,” to tame his/her spirit, police his/her body — and ensure that the productivity of his/her labour increased.⁵³

To a large extent, coloniality was, a way of disciplining bodies with the aim of making better use of them — docility and productivity going hand in hand. How brilliant power could become, how magnificent its display, depended on that increase in productivity. So if, as on several occasions, atrocities against Africans were found to be excessive, the right to punish in this way was nonetheless generally justified in terms of an over-riding concern for profits and productivity.⁵⁴ Yet it would be wrong to reduce the meaning of colonial violence to mere economics. The whip and the cane also served to force upon the African an identity concocted for him/her, an identity that allowed him/her to move in the kind of spaces where he/she was always being ordered around, and where he/she had unconditionally to

⁵⁰ On this question, cf. Achille Mbembe, *Afriques indociles* (Paris: Karthala, 1988), 207–212.

⁵¹ See the case of Kayembe Beleji of Zaïre. In 1953 he was taken on as a lumberjack by a Belgian saw-mill at Cisamba. He refused to take his wife there because of rumors that white bachelors courted young women not for sexual relations, “but to make them live with their dogs.” “For not wanting to comply, I was whipped, lying naked on my bust; I received twenty-five strokes on my left buttock, twenty-five on my right. A black policeman hit me, and Bwana Citoko counted. I got up, my backside covered in blood. And the next day, we were taken in a jeep to Cisamba — my wife, my two children and I.” From, B. Jewsiewicki, “Questions d’histoires intellectuelles de l’Afrique: la construction du soi dans l’autre au Zaïre,” unpub. ms., 1990.

⁵² Read H.R. Manga Mado, *Complaintes d’un forçat* (Yaoundé: Clé, 1969).

⁵³ R.L. Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa* (New York, 1928).

⁵⁴ Cf. C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des compagnies concessionnaires* (Paris: Mouton, 1971).

put on show his/her submissiveness — in forced labour, public works, local corvée labour, military conscription.

In the postcolony, the primary objective of the right to punish (represented here by the execution of the condemned) is however not to create useful individuals or to increase their productive efficiency. This is well illustrated by the misadventures of a teacher, Mr. Joseph Mwaura, as reported by a Kenyan newspaper. On 21 January 1990, the District Commissioner, Mr. Mwanga went to Gitothua, an Independent Pentecostal Church, to address the trouble-torn congregation. Here is an account given by Enock Anjili in *The Standard* of April 7:

On this occasion, the District Commissioner had asked all those present to give their views on how the problems facing the Church could be solved. As the teacher got up to air his views, Mr. Mwanga, fuming with anger, spotted him and called him out to the front, asking him his name and occupation. After realizing that Mr. Mwaura was a teacher and, therefore, a civil servant, Mr. Mwanga asked him why he was sporting a goatee. "As a civil servant, you are supposed to be knowledgeable about the civil service book of Ethics and Conduct. Why do you have a beard? You look like a he-goat with that beard," Mr. Mwanga was quoted to have said amid laughter from the crowd. "You will shave that beard now."

Smiling nervously, Mr. Mwaura fingered through his beard and went to sit down. However, Mr. Mwanga summoned a policeman and told him to take Mr. Mwaura aside. Another policeman was sent to buy a razor blade for Mr. Mwaura's use. The teacher was taken behind an outhouse where he started shaving the offending beard under the supervision of another policeman.

Realizing that he could not get any water or soap to ease the task, Mr. Mwaura ended up using his own spittle to wet his fuzzy chin. Inevitably, Mr. Mwaura, without a mirror to guide his now shaking fingers, nicked himself several times, producing spots of blood.

The task took him less than 15 minutes, after which he stealthily went out of the meeting.⁵⁵

The story does not end there. In March, the teacher who had had his goatee forcibly shaved off on orders of the District Commissioner, was facing further disciplinary action from the Teachers' Service Commission. He was ordered to trim his now re-grown beard and have copies of photographs of the trimmed beard sent to the *Kenya Times* and the Teachers' Service

⁵⁵ E. Anjili, "You must also shave your goatee. TSC orders bearded teacher to drop case," *The Standard*, no. 23597, 7 April 1990.

Commission. The Teachers' Service Commission also ordered Mr. Mwaura to inform the newspaper that after further advice, he had decided to trim his beard because it was not in keeping with the ethics of the teaching profession.

Postcolonial convicts are, then, of a different kind. Authorities can requisition their bodies and make them join in the displays and ceremonies of the *commandement*, requiring them to sing or dance or wriggle their bodies about in the sun.⁵⁶ We can watch these dancers, "these hungover rounds of meat reeking of wine and tobacco, the heavy mouths, dead eyes, the laughter and the faces"⁵⁷ carried away by the staccato rhythm of the drums as a presidential procession goes by on a day set aside to celebrate the party or the "Shining Guide of the Nation" [*Guide éclairé de la nation*].

These bodies could just as easily be in a state of abandon, caught, as the novelist says, "by the beer, the wine, the dancing, the tobacco, the love pumped out like spit, strange drinks, the sects, the palaver — everything that might stop them being the bad conscience of their Excellencies." These same bodies can be neutered — whenever they are thought to be "disfiguring" a public place, or are considered a threat to public order (just as demonstrations are crushed in bloodshed)⁵⁸ — or whenever the *commandement*, wishing to leave imprinted on the minds of its subjects a mark of its enjoyment, sacrifices them to the firing squad.

But even in this case, punishment does not involve the same degree of physical pain as Damiens endured. First, the status of the condemned is not the same. Damiens had made an attempt on the king's life; the two who died at Douala had been charged with minor crimes. Passing over here the instruments of torture and the dramatic cases where the scalpel takes over (as in the crude display of pieces of flesh cut off; the parade of the handicapped, maimed and armless; the burials in mass graves), the death penalty here seems to have no other purpose than death. The bodies of the victims are shattered but once, though with such overwhelming force the *coup de grâce* is used simply to mark the formal end of their existence.

⁵⁶ See, for example, A. Marenja, "Kenians mark Moi day with pomp," *The Standard*, no. 23757, 11 October 1990.

⁵⁷ Cf. S. Labou Tansi, *La vie et demie*, 114–115.

⁵⁸ On Kenya, see the newspapers during the riots that followed the government's refusal to take steps toward a multiparty system, and note the way in which those who contested power were defined: "Drug addicts are bent on breaking law"; "Chaos in Nairobi and Kisumu. Police battle with crowds"; "Police use force in dealing with hooligans."

However, as in the staged rituals examined by Foucault, the execution is definitely a public, highly visible act. The power of the state seeks to dramatize its importance and to define itself in the very act of appropriating the lives of two people and ending them. Whereas the two lives are in principle private, the appropriation of them by the state is organised as a public performance, to be impressed upon the minds of the people and to be remembered. Yet the public performance has to appear spontaneous, and its setting intimate.

Thus, the crowd is summoned because, without it, the execution lacks its glamour; it is the crowd that bestows on the event its purely lavish form.

In this way, the public execution not only reveals the almighty power of the State, but it also becomes a social transaction. The public face of domination can make use of the execution's threatening implications. Does one of the condemned men refuse to be bound to the stake? He is made to kneel down. Does he refuse the food offered to him? He has the choice of whisky or wine. The ranking that operates at such ceremonies (first the Governor, then the Prefect, the representatives of justice, the police, the militia, the clergy, the medical profession) is evidence that power is not an empty space. It has its hierarchies, institutions, and techniques. But above all, in the postcolony it is an *economy of death*. Or more precisely, it opens up a space for enjoyment at the very moment it is making room for death; hence the wild applause which, like the bullets, stifled the cries of the condemned.⁵⁹

This also accounts for the *baroque* character of the postcolony: its eccentric and grotesque art of representation, its taste for the theatrical and its violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness. Obscenity here resides in a mode of expression that might seem macabre were it not that it is an integral part of the stylistics of power. In this sense, the notion of obscenity has no moralizing connotation. Rather, it harks back to the "radiance" things can emit, to the dizzying nature of social formalities, including the suppression of life (since, through such an important act of authority, as an execution, a hermeneutics of madness, pleasure, and drunkenness is laid out).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Cf. J. Miller, "Carnivals of Atrocity. Foucault, Nietzsche, Cruelty," *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (1990), 470–491.

⁶⁰ I am borrowing an insight found in the title of G. Bataille's *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962).

In the remaining remarks, I will seek to identify some particular sites in which the obscene and the grotesque are laid out in the postcolony. I will draw most of my examples from Cameroon, and will privilege the discourses and actions in which power, or those that speak for it, put themselves on show.

THE INTIMACY OF TYRANNY⁶¹

Without underestimating the efficacy of these micro-regulations, it is important not to lose sight of the way in which what Foucault calls “the politics of coercion” is thwarted but also reproduced and amplified by the populace in the very structures of everyday life. Precisely because the postcolonial mode of domination is as much a regime of constraints as a *practice of conviviality and a stylistic of connivance* — marked by innate caution, constant compromises, small tokens of fealty, and a precipitance to denunciate those who are labelled “subversive” — the analyst must be attentive to the myriad ways in which ordinary people bridle, trick, and actually *toy* with power instead of confronting it directly.

These evasions (as endless as Sisyphus’) can be explained only because people are always being trapped in a net of rituals that reaffirm tyranny; and secondly, these rituals, however minor are intimate in nature. Recent Africanist scholarship has not studied in detail the logic of this ensnarement and that of avoidance, nor the point where they are *knotted* so that they become part of one and the same dynamic. And yet, an understanding of this intermingling depends on our knowledge of the logics of “disorder,”⁶² conviviality and improvisation that are inherent in the postcolonial form of authority.

For now, it is sufficient to observe that, at any given moment in the postcolonial historical trajectory, the authoritarian mode can no longer be interpreted strictly in terms of “surveillance,” and “the politics of coercion.” The practices of ordinary people cannot always be read in terms of “opposition to the state,” “deconstructing power,” and “disengagement.” In the postcolony, an *intimate tyranny* links the rulers with the ruled, just as

⁶¹ Here, I am reversing the title of a book by R. Sennet, *Les tyrannies de l'intimité*, tr. A. Berman and R. Folkman (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

⁶² Understood here in the sense used by R. Boudon in *La place du désordre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981).

obscurity is only another aspect of munificence and vulgarity the very condition of state power. If subjection appears more intense than it might be, it is also because the subjects of the *commandement* have internalized the authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life, such as social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, dress styles, rhetorical devices, and the political economy of the body. It is also because, were they to detach themselves from these ludic resources, they would lose the possibility of multiplying their identities.

Yet it is precisely this possibility of assuming multiple identities which accounts for the fact that the body which dances, eats, drinks, dresses in the party uniform, "encumbers" the roads, "assembles *en masse*" along the main avenues, and applauds the passing of the presidential procession in a ritual of confirmation, is nonetheless, willing to dramatize its subordination through these small tokens of fealty. At the same time, instead of keeping silent in the face of obvious official lies and the truculence of elites, this body breaks into laughter. And by laughing, it drains the official universe of meaning and sometimes obliges it to function in emptiness, or powerlessness [*impouvoir*]. This is what allows us to assert that, by dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the "postcolonized subject" is proving his or her loyalty and by compromising with the corrupting control that state power tends to exercise at all levels of everyday life (over benefits, services, pleasures,...) the subject is confirming, in passing, the existence of an undoubtable institution; all this, precisely in order to better "play" with it and modify it whenever possible.

Thus, the public affirmation of the postcolonized subject is not necessarily found in acts of opposition, or resistance, to the *commandement*. What defines the postcolonized subject is his/her ability to engage in baroque practices which are fundamentally ambiguous, mobile, and "revisable," even in instances where there are clear, written, and precise rules. These simultaneous yet apparently contradictory practices ratify, *de facto*, the status of the *fetish* that state power so violently claims as its right. And, by the same token, they maintain, even while drawing upon officialese (its vocabulary, signs, and symbols), the possibility of altering the place and time of this ratification. Concretely, this means that the recognition of state power as a *fetish* is significant only at the very heart of the *ludic rela-*

tionship. It is here that the official sign or sense is most easily unfurled, disenchanted, and recharged, and the simulacrum becomes the dominant modality of transactions between the state and society, or between rulers and those who are supposed to obey. This is what makes postcolonial relations *relations of conviviality, but also of powerlessness par excellence* — from the point of view either of the masters of power or of those whom they crush. But, because these processes are essentially *magical*, they in no way disenscribe [*désinscrire*] the dominated from the epistemological field of power.⁶³

Consider, for example, ceremonies for the so-called “transfer of office” [*passation de service*] which punctuate postcolonial bureaucratic time and profoundly effect the imaginary of individuals, elites and masses alike. One such ceremony took place in October 1987 in the small town of Mbankomo in the Central Province. Mr. Essomba Ntonga Godfroy, the “newly elected” municipal administrator was to be “installed in his post,” along with his two assistants, Mr. André Effa Owona and Jean Paul Otu. The ceremony was presided over by the prefect of Mefou, Mr. Tabou Pierre, who was assisted by the sub-prefect of Mbankomo district, Mr. Bekonde Belinga Henoc-Pierre. Among the main personalities on the “official” stand were the president of the party’s departmental section, representatives of the elites from inside and outside the district, “traditional” authorities, and cult priests. The dancers were accompanied by drums and xylophones. A church choir also made its contribution. According to a witness:

Elation reached a feverish climax when the tricolour scarves were presented to the municipal administrator and his two assistants, and their badges were handed to the three elected of October 25. Well before this outburst of joy, the Prefect, Mr. Tabou, gave a brilliant and well received brief speech explaining the meaning of the day’s ceremony to those elected and to the people — celebration of recovered democracy.⁶⁴

He did not forget also to rattle off the list of positions held by the recently promoted official. The Prefect not only mentioned his age, but also

⁶³ Cf. the metaphor of the cat and the mouse used by E. Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, tr. C. Stewart (New York: Farrer Straus, Giroux, 1988), 281–282.

⁶⁴ P. Essono, “Installation de l’administrateur municipal de Mbankomo. La fête de la démocratie retrouvée,” *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4027, 4 December 1987, 11.

reminded the audience of his sporting successes.⁶⁵ But it was at the installation of Mr. Pokossy Ndoumbe as head of the borough of Douala that the most detailed presentation was given:

Mr. Pokossy Ndoumbe first saw the light of day on August 21, 1932 at Bonamikengue, Akwa. He attended the main school in Akwa, obtaining his certificate in 1947. Then he left for France. He passed his first courses without difficulty at the Jules Ferry school in Coulonniers. He passed the baccalaureate in experimental science in 1954 at the Michelet high school in Vanves. He was drawn to pharmaceutical studies in Paris, and he diligently attended the faculty of pharmacy in Paris, where he obtained his diploma in 1959. During his final years at the University, he worked as an intern at the Emile Roux Hospital in Brevannes before returning to his native country in January 1960.⁶⁶

Such attention to detail should not come as a surprise; it is part of the art of distinction.⁶⁷ The enumeration of the slightest educational achievement is one of the postcolonial codes of prestige, with special attention being given to distinctions attained in Europe. Thus, for example, people cite the number of diplomas with great care, they exhibit their titles (doctor, chief, president,...) with great affectation as a way of claiming honour, glory, and consideration. In such paradoxical ostentation and deference, the delineation of scholarly achievements (the enumeration of the number of diplomas and titles one has amassed, the names of the schools and universities that have been attended ...) also constitutes a marker of rank and status.⁶⁸

Another obvious example is the ceremony where decorations and medals are awarded. During the 20 May 1989 ceremonies alone, more than 3,000 people were decorated with 481 gold medals, 1,000 vermeil medals, and 1,682 silver medals. The medals, which were obtained from the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, cost CFA 11,500 each for the gold ones, CFA 10,500 for the vermeil, and CFA 8,500 for the silver ones. Apart from

⁶⁵ One is also told, among other things, that he was an ex-champion and record holder of the 400 metre in Cameroon (50 1/10 sec.), having received a gold medal in the Franco-phone school and in a university competition in May 1957.

⁶⁶ Mouelle Bissi, "Communauté urbaine de Douala. Place à M. Pokossy Ndoumbe," *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4372, 19 April 1989, 3.

⁶⁷ Refer to P. Bourdieu, *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979, with special attention to the section on struggles over symbols.

⁶⁸ On the government of rites and of private conduct, as well as the notion of the "code of circulation/distinction," cf. E. Goffman, *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne. Les relations en public*, tr. Alain Kihm (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973), 19–72.

this, "contributions" were given by businesses to the recipients of the medals to help with family festivities.⁶⁹ Here, family festivities included "libations, feasting, and diverse orgies (which) are the norm in such circumstances."⁷⁰ To be sure, one could be troubled by the purely lavish form of these expenditures, since it is rare to find a recipient of a medal who is not heavily indebted the day after the festivities. But, that would overlook the point that, in this context, the granting of a medal is a political act through which bureaucratic relations are transformed into clientelistic networks where pleasures, privileges, and resources are distributed in exchange for political compliance.⁷¹ The lavish distribution of food and other marks of prodigality are of interest only to the extent that they make manifest relations of superiority; what circulates are not gifts but tokens creating networks of indebtedness and subordination.⁷²

The day they told me that I was to be decorated, my wife and I were so excited that we stayed up all night talking about the event. Until then, we had only taken part in celebrations when others had been decorated. This time, we would be celebrating our own medal.... On the day I received the medal, my wife had prepared a pretty bouquet of flowers which she presented to me on the ceremonial stand to the sound of public applause.⁷³

In the postcolony, magnificence and the desire to shine are not the prerogative of only those who command. The people also want to be honoured, to shine, and to take part in celebrations.

Last Saturday, the Muslim community of Cameroon celebrated the end of Ramadan. For thirty days, members of the community had been deprived of many things from dawn till dusk. They refrained from drinking, eating,

⁶⁹ Figures are taken from R. Owona, "Un prix fort," *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4391, 18 May 1989.

⁷⁰ P. Ntete Ntete, "Un privilège qu'il faut mériter," *Cameroon Tribune*, no. cité, 15.

⁷¹ E. Leach's, *Political Systems in Highland Burma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) has already indicated how the rules of a system can be manipulated in order to maximize prestige and social honorability, 155–156 and 183–190.

⁷² On these questions, cf. M. Mauss, *Essai sur le don*, 269.

⁷³ See *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4391, 18 May 1989, 14. For a similar case, see the report of the ceremonies for the decoration of army officers, *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4371, 18 April 1989. And for a theoretical perspective, refer to E. Hatch, "Theories of Social Honor," *American Anthropologist* 91 (1989), 341–353, even though the author confines himself to a dichotomy between materialist and non-materialist approaches.

smoking, sexual relations, and saying anything that goes against the Muslim faith and law. Last Saturday marked the end of these privations for the whole Muslim community of Cameroon.⁷⁴

From this, one can say that the obscenity of power in the postcolony is also fed by a desire for majesty on the part of the people [*la plèbe*]. Because the postcolony is characterized, above all, by scarcity the metaphor of food “lends itself to the wide angle lens of both imagery and efficacy.”⁷⁵ Food and tips [*pourboire*] are a constitutive aspect of what politics or resistance mean.⁷⁶ But the question of eating, like that of scarcity, is indissociable from particular regimes of death, specific economies of pleasure, and specific therapeutic quests.⁷⁷ This is why “the night”⁷⁸ and “witchcraft,”⁷⁹ the “invisible,”⁸⁰ the “belly,” and the “mouth”⁸¹ or the “penis” are all historical phenomena in their own right. They are institutions and sites of power in the same way that pleasure or fashion are said to be:

Cameroonians love slick gaberdine suits, Christian Dior outfits, Yamamoto blouses, shoes of crocodile skin...⁸²

⁷⁴ J.B. Simgba, “La communauté musulmane du Cameroun en fête,” *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4383, 7 and 8 May 1989, 7.

⁷⁵ J.I. Guyer, “British Colonial and Postcolonial Food Regulation, with reference to Nigeria: An Essay in Formal Sector Anthropology,” m.s., 7.

⁷⁶ Understood here in the sense intended by J.-F. Bayart in his *L'Etat en Afrique. La politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), where he uses the Foucaultian notion of “gouvernementalité” to speak of the “gouvernementalité du ventre” [belly politics] in black Africa.

⁷⁷ Cf. M. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man. A Study of Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁷⁸ Cf. E. de Rosny, *Les yeux de ma chèvre* (Paris: Plon, 1977).

⁷⁹ Cf. P. Geschiere, “Sorcery and the State: Popular Modes of Political Action among the Maka of Southeast Cameroon,” *Critique of Anthropology* 8 (1988).

⁸⁰ See P. Bonnafé, *Nzo Lipfu, le lignage de la mort. La sorcellerie, idéologie de la lutte sociale sur le plateau kukuya* (Paris: Labethno, 1978).

⁸¹ Read E.P. Brown, *Nourrir les gens, nourrir les haines* (Paris: Société d'ethnographie, 1983).

⁸² Read R. Owona, “Branché sur les cinq continents,” *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4378, 27 April, 1989.

The label is the true sign of *class*.... There are certain names that stand out. They are the ones that should be worn on a jacket, a shirt, a skirt, a scarf, or a pair of shoes if you want to win respect.⁸³

Don't be surprised if one day, when you enter an office unannounced you discover piles of clothing on the desks. The hallways of ministries and other public or private offices have become the market place *par excellence*. Market conditions are so flexible that everyone — from the director to the messenger [*planton*] — finds what they want. Indeed, owing to the current crisis, sellers give big reductions and offer long-term credit...

Business is so good that many people throw themselves into it head down. A veritable waterhole, where sophisticated ladies rub shoulders with all kinds of ruffians and layabouts. The basis of the entire "network" is travel. It is no secret that most of the clothes on the market come from the West. Those who have the "chance" to go there regularly are quick to notice that they can reap great benefits from frequent trips. A few "agreements" with customs officials, and the deal is on.⁸⁴

Even death does not escape this desire to shine and to be honoured. The rulers and the ruled want more than ceremonies and celebrations to show off their splendour. Those who have accumulated goods, prestige and influence are not only tied to the constraint of giving.⁸⁵ They are also taken by the desire to "die well," and to be buried with pomp.⁸⁶ Funerals constitute one of the occasions where those who command gaze at themselves, in the manner of Narcissus.⁸⁷ Thus, when Joseph Awunti, the Presidential Minister in charge of relations with parliament, died on 4 November 1987, his body was received at Bamenda airport by the then Governor of the North-western province, Mr. Wabon Ntuba Mboe, who was himself accompanied by the Grand Chancellor, the then first Vice-President of the party, plus a

⁸³ D. Ndachi Tagne, "Le venin hypnotique de la griffe," *Cameroon Tribune*, numéro cité.

⁸⁴ C. Mien Zok, "Le prêt-à-porter fait du porte-à-porte," *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4378, 27 April 1989.

⁸⁵ P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque. Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique*, (Paris: Seuil, 1976), 230.

⁸⁶ See the remarks by J. Omoruyi, "Nigerian Funeral Programmes: An Unexplored Source of Information," *Africa* 58, no. 4 (1988), 466-9.

⁸⁷ But they are also one of the sites where the innumerable conflicts linked to inequalities and the distribution of inheritance are played out. On this point, read C. Vidal, "Funérailles et conflit social en Côte d'Ivoire," *Politique Africaine* 24 (1987); and M. Gilbert, "The Sudden Death of a Millionaire: Conversion and Consensus in a Ghanaian Kingdom," *Africa* 58, no. 3 (1988), 291-313.

variety of administrative, political, and “traditional” authorities. Several personalities and members of the government were also present, including the “personal” representative of the head of state, Mr. Joseph Charles Dumba, Minister to the Presidency. The Economic and Social Council was represented by its president, Mr. Ayang Luc, the National Assembly by the president of the parliamentary group, and the Central Committee of the Party by its Treasurer.⁸⁸ Here, the approbation of power penetrated the very manner in which the dead was to be buried. It thus appears that those who command seek to familiarize themselves with death, thereby paving the way for their own burial to take on a certain quality of pleasure and expenditure.

During the funeral of Mr. Thomas Ebongalame, the former Secretary of the National Assembly, member of the Upper Council of the Magistracy, Administrative Secretary of the Central Committee of the Party, board member of many different parastatals, and “an initiated member of the secret society of his tribe,” the procession left Yaoundé by road. Huge crowds had come from various parts of the Southwestern province to pay its last respects to the deceased:

At Muyuka, Ebonji, Tombel, and Nyasos, primary and secondary school students formed human hedges several hundreds meters long. When the body arrived in Kumba, the main town of Meme, the place turned itself into a procession. At the head was the ENI-ENIA fanfare playing a mournful tune. People wept profusely. ... In this town, with a population of 12,000, all socio-economic activity had been put on ice since 30 April, when the tragic news was heard. People awaited instructions from Yaoundé. No fewer than ten meetings were held to organize the funeral program.⁸⁹

As we have seen, obscenity and vulgarity — when regarded as more than a moral category — constitute one of the modalities of power in the postcolony. But it is also one of the arenas of its deconstruction or its ratification by subalterns. Bakhtin’s error was to attribute these practices to the dominated. The production of burlesque is not specific to them. The real inversion takes place when, in their desire for splendour, the masses join in madness and clothe themselves in the flashy rags of power so as to

⁸⁸ Nzeke Mbonwoh, “Le corps de Joseph Awunti repose désormais à Kedju Ketinguh,” *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 4010, 12 November 1987, 3.

⁸⁹ Monda Bakoa, “Heures de tristesse dans le Sud-Ouest,” *Cameroon Tribune*, 14 and 15 May 1989, 3.

reproduce its epistemology; and when, too, power, in its own violent quest for grandeur and prestige, makes vulgarity and wrongdoing [*délinquance*] its main mode of existence. It is here, within the confines of this intimacy, that the forces of tyranny in Sub-Saharan Africa have to be studied. Such research must go beyond institutions, beyond formal positions of power and the written rules, and examine the way the implicit and the explicit are interwoven, and how the practices of those who command and of those who are assumed to obey are so entangled as to render them powerless. For it is precisely the situations of powerlessness [*impouvoir*] that are the situations of violence *par excellence*.

Achille Mbembe is an Associate Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania. He is currently on leave at the Brookings Institution (Washington, DC). He is the author of *Afriques indociles* (Paris: Karthala, 1988), and co-author with J.-F. Bayart and C. Toulabor of *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire: Contributions à une problématique de la démocratie* (Paris: Karthala, 1992).