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## PROVISIONAL NOTES ON THE POSTCOLONY

*Achille Mbembe*

In this article I will examine the banality of power in the 'postcolony'. 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, though certainly 'banality' implies the predictability of routine if only because it is made up of repeated daily actions and gestures. Instead I am referring here to those elements of the obscene and the grotesque that Mikhail Bakhtin claims to have located in 'non-official' cultures but which in fact are intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed.<sup>1</sup>

The notion 'postcolony' identifies specifically a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial relationship, *par excellence*, involves. To be sure, the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic, yet it has nonetheless an internal coherence. It is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes. It is not, however, just an economy of signs in which power is mirrored and *imagined* self-reflectively. The postcolony is characterised by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation.<sup>2</sup> But the postcolony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery which, once they are in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence (see Mbembe, 1990; *Politique Africaine*, 1982, 1991; Geffray, 1990). In this sense, the postcolony is a particularly revealing (and rather dramatic) stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline.

In a postcolony of this kind, then, I am concerned with the ways in which state power (1) *creates*, through its administrative and bureaucratic practices, a world of meanings all its own, a master code which, in the process of becoming the society's primary central code, ends by governing—perhaps paradoxically—the various logics that underlie all other meanings within that society; (2) attempts to institutionalise its world of meanings as a 'socio-historical world'<sup>3</sup> 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 the *cibles*, or 'target population',<sup>4</sup> but also by integrating it into the consciousness of the period.

The basic argument of this article is that, in order to account for both the mind-set and the effectiveness of postcolonial relations of power, we need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance *v.* passivity, autonomy *v.* subjection, state *v.* civil society, hegemony *v.* counter-hegemony, totalisation *v.* detotalisation. These oppositions are not helpful;<sup>5</sup> rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations.<sup>6</sup> In the postcolony the *commandement*<sup>7</sup> seeks to institutionalise itself, in order to achieve legitimation and hegemony (*recherche*

*hégémonique*), in the form of a *fetish*.<sup>8</sup> The signs, vocabulary and narratives that it produces are not meant merely to be symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings which are not negotiable and which one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge. So as to ensure that no such challenge takes place, the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas; they adopt a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts;<sup>9</sup> but they also have resort, if necessary, to the systematic application of pain.<sup>10</sup> The basic goal is not just to bring a specific political consciousness into being but to make it effective. We therefore need to examine the way the world of meanings thus produced is ordered, the types of institutions, the knowledges, norms and practices that structure this new 'common sense' 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 the province of ordinary people (*la plèbe*). 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 showing how arbitrary and vulnerable is officialdom and turning it all into an object of ridicule.<sup>11</sup> Though this view is not entirely invalid, we need to shift our perspective if we are to resolve the problems posed at the start of this article; we need, in short, to uncover the use made of the grotesque and the obscene not just in ordinary people's lives but (1) in the timing and location of those occasions which state power organises for dramatising its own magnificence, (2) in the actual materials used in the ceremonial displays through which it makes manifest its majesty, and (3) the specific manner in which it offers these, as spectacles, for its 'subjects' (*cibles*) to watch.

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 can best be characterised as illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the *commandement* and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space. It is precisely this logic—the necessary familiarity and domesticity in the relationship—that explains why there has not been (as might otherwise have been expected from those so dominated) the resistance or the accommodation, the disengagement or the 'refusal to be captured' (Hyden, 1980), the contradiction between overt acts and gestures in public and the covert responses made 'underground' (*sous maquis*). Instead, it has resulted in the mutual zombification of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate. This zombification meant that each robbed the other of their vitality and has left them both impotent (*impouvoir*).

The examples to be offered in this article indeed suggest that the post-colony is made up not of one single 'public space' but of several, each having its own separate logic yet nonetheless liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain specific contexts: hence the post-colonial 'subject' has had to learn to bargain in this conceptual market

place. Furthermore, subjects in the postcolony have also had to have a marked ability to manage not just a single identity for themselves but several, which are flexible enough for them to negotiate as and when required.<sup>12</sup>

If there is, then, such a 'postcolonial subject', he 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 institutionalisation (its *recherche hégémonique*) in its capacity as a fetish<sup>13</sup> 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 this practice, as *homo ludens*, that enables subjects to splinter their identities and to represent themselves as always changing their persona; they are constantly undergoing mitosis,<sup>14</sup> whether it be in 'official' space or not. Hence it would be wrong, it seems, to continue to interpret postcolonial relationships in terms of resistance or absolute domination, or as a function of the binary oppositions usually adduced in conventional analyses of movements of indiscipline and revolt (e.g. counter-discourse, counter-society, counter-hegemony, 'the second society', etc).<sup>15</sup>

#### EXCESS, AND THE CREATIVITY OF ABUSE<sup>16</sup>

A few additional explanatory remarks are necessary. First, there is the question of the grotesque and the 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, people developed ways of separating words or phrases off from their conventional meanings and using them in quite another sense. He illustrates how they thus built up a whole vocabulary, equivocal and ambiguous, that ran parallel to the official discourse (Toulabor, 1981, 1986: especially 302–9). Togo was until recently the perfect example of postcolonial construction. The official discourse made use of all necessary means to maintain the fiction of a society devoid of conflict. Postcoloniality could be seen here behind the facade of a policy in which the state considered itself simultaneously as indistinguishable from society and as the upholder of the law and the keeper of the truth. The state was embodied in a single person: the President. He alone controlled the law and could, on his own, grant or abolish liberties—since these are, after all, malleable. In similar vein, in Cameroon the head of state had declared, 'I brought you to democracy and liberty . . . You now have liberty. Make good use of it.'<sup>17</sup>

In Togo the sole party, Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais (RPT), claimed to control the whole of public and social life, directing it in pursuance 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, contrary to expectations in a society so deprived of resources, there remained considerable disparity between the images that the state projected of itself and society, on one hand, and, on the other, the way people played and manipulated these

images—and people did so not just well away from officialdom, out of earshot, out of sight of power<sup>18</sup> 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, for longer or shorter periods of time. 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 glory state power. With a simple tonal shift one metaphor could take on many meanings. Under cover, therefore, of official slogans, people sang about the sudden erection of the ‘enormous’ and ‘rigid’ presidential phallus, of how it remained 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 intensified prebendalisation<sup>19</sup> of their state since 1982, when Ahidjo resigned and was replaced constitutionally by his former Prime Minister. The ‘poaching’ of meanings can go much further. For example, the Togolese party acronym, RPT, 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’.<sup>20</sup> ‘Cut it up and dole it out!’ (*redépécer*)<sup>21</sup> was preferred by Cameroonians, who thus gave another meaning to the name of the former sole party, the RDPC (Rassemblement Democratique du Peuple Camerounais), and in this way incorporated the state within a different kind of imagery—that of the belly and of eating, the right of capture and the redistribution of spoils, all these being metaphors common in the vernacular terminologies of power (see Bayart, 1989).

The obsession with orifices, odours 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, thick, delivering thighs’ and ‘the essential, bewitching arse’ 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 check on his weapons. There he undressed . . . For this woman (. . .) he intended deep penetrations, staccato and foamy as he had done in his youth. No more could he flow, thanks to the trouble his momentary impotence had left in his loins; no more could he produce his favourite pop-popping, his stops and starts. Old age had caught him a nasty blow from below, but he was still a dignified male, still even a male who could perform, able to rise and fall, among other things. [Tansi, 1979: 42, see also 55–6, 68]

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. Festivities and celebrations, in this regard, are the two key vehicles for indulging the taste. But the idiom of its organisation and its symbolism

focus, above all, on the mouth, the belly and the phallus.<sup>22</sup> But it is not enough, in this context of postcolonial *gouvernementalité* (Foucault, 1989), to bring into play the mouth, the belly or the phallus, or merely to refer to them, in order to be automatically obscene. ‘Mouth’, ‘belly’, ‘phallus’, when used in popular speech and jokes, have above all to be located in the real world, located in real time, as play, as fun. In short, they are active statements about the human condition, and as such contribute integrally to the making of political culture in the postcolony. Every reference, then, to mouth, belly or phallus is consequently a discourse on the world and on death, a means of auto-interpretation, and of negotiating that interpretation and the forces which may shape it.

Beyond this concern specifically with the mouth, belly and phallus, the body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power. But if, as we have suggested, it is the festivities and celebrations that are the vehicles, *par excellence*, for giving expression to the *commandement* and for staging its displays of magnificence and prodigality, then the body in question is firstly a body that eats and drinks, and secondly a body that is open—in both ways. Hence the significance given to orifices and the central part they play in people’s political humour.

Togolese references to the ‘loud fart’ or ‘faecal matter’, the Cameroonians’ reiteration of *redépéçage*, or the oft-cited ‘a goat grazes wherever it is tied up’, 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 or, more crudely, 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 for someone to follow the trail of violence and domination that is intrinsic to the *commandement*. 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 policemen and their victims, between teachers and pupils.

Is it enough to say that the postcolonial subject, as a *homo ludens*, is simply making fun of the *commandement*, making it an object of derision, as would seem to be the case if we were to apply Bakhtin’s categories? To a large extent, the outbursts of ribaldry and derision are actually taking the official world seriously, at face value or at least at the value officialdom itself gives it.<sup>23</sup> In the end, whether the encounter of state and people is ‘masked’ or not does not matter. The key point is that in this very specific historical context of domination and subjection the postcolony neither minces nor spares its words. Indeed, the purest expression of *commandement* is conveyed by a total lack of restraint, by a great delight too in getting really dirty. Debauchery and buffoonery readily go hand in hand. The body of the despot, his frowns and smiles, his decrees and commands, the public notices and communiqués repeated over and over again: these are the

primary signifiers, it is these that have force, that get interpreted and reinterpreted, and feed back further significance into the system.

The question of knowing whether humour in the postcolony is an expression of 'resistance' or not, whether it is, *a priori*, opposition or simply a manifestation of hostility towards authority, is thus of secondary importance. For the most part, people who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandement*. Hence the image of, say, the President's anus is not of something out of this world—though to people's great amusement the official line may treat it as such; instead, people consider it as it really is, capable of defecating like any commoner's.

Confrontation occurs the moment the *commandement*, with vacuous indifference to any sense of truth, seeks to compel submission and force people into dissimulation. The problem here is not that they do not obey nor even pretend to obey. Conflict arises from the fact that the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic and that it is in practice impossible to create a single, permanently stable system out of all the signs, images and markers current in the postcolony; and that is why they are constantly being shaped and reshaped, as much by the rulers as by the ruled, in attempts to rewrite the mythologies of power.<sup>24</sup> This is why, too, the postcolony is, *par excellence*, a hollow pretence, a regime of unreality (*régime du simulacre*). By making it possible to play and have fun outside the limits set by officialdom, the very fact that the regime is a sham allows ordinary people (1) to simulate adherence to the innumerable official rituals that life in the postcolony requires—such as the wearing of uniforms and the carrying of the party card, making public gestures of support and sticking up portraits of the autocrat in one's home; (2) to say the unsayable and to recognise the otherwise unrecognisable. In other words, the fetish, seen for the sham it is, is made to lose its might, and becomes merely an idol.

Although I have argued that the reason for the emphasis on orifices, etc., in popular humour is due to the *commandement's* predilection for lechery, I must quickly add that the point would be lost if we took this sense of humour to be simply an aspect of a rather crude, primitive culture. Rather, I would argue that defecation, copulation, pomp and extravagance are all classical ingredients in the production of power, and that there is nothing specifically African about it. I would go further: the obsession with orifices has to be seen as due to the fact that in the postcolony the *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 (Bigo, 1989). The *commandement* aspires to act as a total cosmology for its subjects—yet, owing to its very oddity, it is this cosmology that popular humour causes to capsize, often quite unintentionally.

What gives rise to conflict is not the frequent references to the genital organs of the men in power but rather the way in which people by their laughter kidnap power and force it, as if by accident, to examine its own vulgarity. In other words, in the postcolony the search for majesty and prestige contains within it elements of crudeness and the bizarre that the official order tries hard to hide,<sup>25</sup> but which ordinary people bring to its

attention, often unwittingly. The following incident from Kenya shows how in practice these elements can go well beyond the limits of fun.

A woman from Busia was recently exposed to an agonising 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 Thursday at a road block on the Kisumu–Busia road. The couple explained they did not know that it was necessary to stand to attention. The woman and her husband were sitting on the side of the road, waiting for transport to take them back to Busia.<sup>26</sup>

It is with the conscious aim of avoiding such trouble that ordinary people locate the fetish of state power in the realm of ridicule; there they can tame it or shut it up and render it powerless. This done, the fetish takes on the status of an idol, an idol that in this instance is a familiar friend, a member of the family as much for the rulers as for the ruled.<sup>27</sup> 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 have 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 expands. Hence, for example, the *commandement* has to be extravagant, since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele. Likewise it must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in matters of dress and life style, thereby turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theatre.<sup>28</sup> Similarly there has to be a process of 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 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. [Tansi, 1979: 122]

The actions that signal sovereignty have to be carried through both with style and with an adequately harsh firmness, otherwise the splendour 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 with a view to increasing their productivity as to ensure the maximum docility. To exercise authority, furthermore, is to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well; and, as S. Labou Tansi shows, to pass most of one's time in 'pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls' (Tansi, 1988: 98). Pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatised, with sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, etc. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one of the pillars upholding the reproduction of the phallogocratic system.

It seems, then, that we can reasonably conclude from these preliminary remarks that the postcolony is a world of anxious virility, a world hostile to

continence, frugality, sobriety. Furthermore, the set of images and idioms evoked above is 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 in the private domain, are not necessarily bringing about the collapse of power or even resisting it. Confronted with the state's eagerness to cover up its actual origins, people are simply bearing witness, often unconsciously, to the fact that the grotesque is no more foreign to officialdom than the common man is impervious to the charms of majesty. Indeed in its desire for majesty the popular world borrows the whole ideological repertoire 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 takes on grandeur. It is unnecessary, then, to do as Bakhtin does and insist on oppositions (*dédoublement*)<sup>29</sup> or, as conventional analysis has it, on the purported logic of resistance, disengagement or disjunction.<sup>30</sup> Instead the emphasis should be upon the logic of 'conviviality', on the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, which inscribe the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme.

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 characterise its power, or even the fact that it is particularly raw power that it prefers to exercise; peculiar also to the postcolony is the way the relationship between rulers and ruled is forged by means of a specific practice: simulacrum (*le simulacre*). This explains why dictators can go to sleep at night lulled by roars of adulation and support 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 pretence, to glue back together the bits and pieces of their fragmented identities. By taking over the signs and language of officialdom, people have been able to remythologise their own conceptual universe while in the process turning the *commandement* into a sort of zombie. 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.<sup>31</sup> The process is fundamentally magical: 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 cosmology (*un ordre du monde*) or more simply as a fetish. A fetish is, among other things, an object which aspires to be made sacred; it demands power and seeks to maintain a close, intimate relationship with those who carry it (Coquet, 1985). A fetish can also take the form of a talisman which one can call upon, honour and dread. In the postcolony fetishistic power is invested not only in the person of the autocrat but also in the persons of the *commandement* and its agents—the party, policemen, soldiers, administrators and officials, middlemen and dealers. It turns the postcolonial autocrat into an object

that feeds upon (and feeds to others) applause, flattery, lies. By virtue of exercising raw power, 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, arbitrary to the extent that it reflects only upon itself.<sup>32</sup> If so, we should not underestimate the 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 domination<sup>33</sup>—since these are essential to keeping the people under the spell of the *commandement*, within an enchanted forest of adulation<sup>34</sup> that at the same time makes people laugh. While for the ruled it is a matter of fun and play, from the government's perspective it is a question of building up and imposing a whole new mindscape, an *imaginaire* so that 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 because, if we provisionally follow Bakhtin and accept that carnival-like praxis attacks a cosmology and creates a myth centred upon the body, we have to conclude that what we have in the postcolony is a case of 'theophagy'<sup>35</sup> where the god himself is devoured by his worshippers.

The totem that acts as a double to power is no longer protected by taboo (Freud, 1983); there is a breach in the wall of prohibitions. In transgressing taboos and constraints, 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 that defecates like anyone else's. So too the penis of 'His Excellency' turns out to be no more than a peasant's, unable to resist, amidst the aromas of everyday life, the scent of women.

If people can, even if unintentionally, dismember the gods the autocrats aspire to be and can devour them, 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–Yaoundé road [where] they saw the crowd. Apart from the local population, totalling several hundred people, there were the authorities: the Governor of Coastal Province, the Prefect of Wouri, the Public Prosecutor, the Deputy Prefect, the officer in command of the G.M.I., the Governor of Douala's central prison, a priest, a doctor, one of their lawyers . . . several policemen and gendarmes, soldiers impeccably dressed in combat gear, firemen . . .

In the police bus that drove them to the place of execution, they were brought food. They refused to take a last meal; they preferred to drink. They were given whisky and red wine which they rapidly drained. At seven o'clock . . . they were taken up to the stakes, which were set about ten metres apart. While Oumbe 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 grace. And, incredible but true, the crowd broke into frenzied applause, as if it was the end of a good show.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> But we must not forget that the case above occurred in postcolony. I do not mean to imply that the postcolonial rationale bears no relationship to the colonial rationale (cf. Mbembe, 1988: 207–12); 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.<sup>38</sup> The colony also had its convict labour (Mado, 1969). Colonialism, as a relation of power 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 characterised native life, colonialism found it necessary to rein in the abundant sexuality of the negro, to tame his spirit, police his body—and ensure that the productivity of his labour increased (Buell, 1928).

Colonialism was to a large extent a way of disciplining bodies with the aim of making better use of them: docility and productivity go hand in hand. But 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 overriding concern for profits and productivity (Coquéry-Vidrovitch, 1972). 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, an identity that allowed him to move in the kind of spaces where he was always being ordered around, and where he had unconditionally to put on show his 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 nor to increase their productive efficiency. This is well illustrated by the misadventure of a teacher, Mr Joseph Mwaura, as reported by a Kenyan newspaper. On 21 January 1990 the District Commissioner, Mr Mwango, went to Gitothua, an Independent Pentecostal Church, to address the trouble-torn congregation. Here is the account given by Enock Anjili in *The Standard* of 7 April:

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 give his opinion, Mr Mwango, fuming with anger, spoke rudely to him, called him out to the front and asked him to give his name and occupation.

When he had done this and the District Commissioner realised he was a teacher and therefore a state employee, Mr Mwango wanted to know why he sported a little goatee beard: 'As a state employee, you ought to know the civil service rules. Why have you got a beard? You look like a billy-goat with that beard on! *Utanyoa hiyo sasa*—go and shave it off straight away!'

Mr Mwango summoned a policeman urgently and told him to place Mr Mwango under arrest. Another policeman was sent off to get a razor blade. They then took the teacher outside; he undertook to shave off the offending beard and moustache himself, under the eye of the other policeman.

Realising that he had neither water nor soap to make his task easier, Mr Mwaura ended up using his own saliva. And since he had no mirror to guide his shaking fingers, he nicked himself several times, producing spots of blood. [Anjili, 1990]

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

Forced labour (*les forçats*) in the postcolony, then, is of a different kind. Authorities can requisition people's 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 (e.g. Marenja, 1990). We can watch these dancers, 'these hung-over rounds of meat reeking of wine and tobacco, the heavy mouths, dead eyes, the smiles and the faces' (Tansi, 1979: 114–115), 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'.

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, the strange drinks, the sects, the palaver—everything that might stop them being the bad conscience of their Excellencies' (Tansi, 1979). 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)<sup>39</sup>—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 those 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 that the *coup de grâce* is used simply to mark the formal end of their existence. 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 dramatise its importance and to define itself in the very act of appropriating the lives of two people and ending them. Whereas the two lives, the two deaths 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. A crowd is summoned because without it the execution lacks glamour; it is the crowd that gives the event its element of lavishness.

In this way a public execution not only reveals the total power of the state but it becomes a social transaction. The public face of domination can make use of the execution's threatening implications. Did one of the condemned men refuse to be bound to the stake? He was made to kneel down. Did he refuse the food offered him? He had 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 gendarmerie, the clergy, the medical profession . . .) is evidence that power is not an empty space. It has its hierarchies and its institutions, it has its 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 (cf. Miller, 1990).

This 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. 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. The notion of obscenity has no moral connotation here; it harks back to the 'radiation' things can emit, to the headiness of social forms—including the suppression of life (since through such an important act of authority as an execution a whole hermeneutic is laid out for madness, pleasure, intoxication).<sup>40</sup>

In my remaining remarks I will seek to identify some of the 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 DOMAIN OF DRUNKARDS

On 5 October 1988, the head of state, Mr Paul Biya, returned from a trip to the United Nations, where, like most heads of state, he had addressed the General Assembly. His speech was very short. It offered not one idea or proposition which spoke to the contemporary preoccupations of international opinion. It was an altogether ordinary speech given by one of those leaders of one of those small, obscure African states where nothing happens of any

consequence for the general stability of the world. But, as always, the speech was televised in Cameroon. The trip itself was described as a 'long, complex yet triumphant tour' (*périple*).<sup>41</sup>

This is perhaps why, on his return, the mayor of the capital, Yaoundé, published a 'communiqué' calling upon 'all the people' of the town 'to gather as one to show the support of the whole Cameroonian people for His Excellency, Mr Paul Biya, champion of the Third World and architect of co-operation without discrimination'.<sup>42</sup> To facilitate the 'spontaneous' participation of the masses in an 'exceptional welcome', shops were to be closed from one o'clock on. All traders and stallholders from the market and the Chamber of Agriculture, as well as all merchants downtown, were 'invited to fill Avenue du 20 mai from the post office roundabout to the Carrefour Warda'.<sup>43</sup> And that is what they did.

This was not, of course, the first time that the head of state had returned from a trip abroad. Nor was it the first time that the major had invited the population to 'fill the Avenue du 20 mai from the post office roundabout to the Carrefour Warda'. It is common practice, so common that it has become banal. It is part of the permanent public demonstration of grandeur that Cameroon shares with the other postcolonies of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>44</sup> In this sense the return of Paul Biya was in no way unusual. The staging that accompanied it marked simply one instance of the dramatisation of a specific mode of domination which dates back to the 1960s. It has had the time to routinise itself and to invent its own rules—the aim being, on each occasion, to make use of an event which is in itself banal (in this case, addressing the General Assembly of the United Nations) and quite anodine, given the way such events are seen by the rest of the world, and turn it into a source of prestige, illusion, magic.

Given this obsession for being deferential, the official newspaper could describe the presentation of credentials by new ambassadors thus:

Nothing but glory for Cameroonian diplomacy! Nothing but honour for our country which has just welcomed, in less than a week, six new ambassadors! After those of Israel, China, Senegal and Algeria last Friday, there were the new diplomats from East Germany and Gabon who presented their credentials to the Head of State, His Excellency Paul Biya.<sup>45</sup>

Of the visit of Paul Biya to Belgium in May 1989 the paper said:

Yesterday afternoon Belgium could no longer hide its impatience and eagerness to honour the Cameroonian presidential couple. The country welcomed the Head of State and his wife with a degree of warmth and enthusiasm which people here say is unheard of for such an occasion. Belgium, and especially Brussels, was so beautiful and sunny yesterday that it seemed as if the sun had deliberately decided to shine in all its splendour so as to underline that this was a day like no other.<sup>46</sup>

Should we construe this account as simple verbal extravagance, to be given no more meaning than it merits? That would be to overlook the fact that in the postcolony the *work* of power also involves a process of 'enchantment' in order to produce 'fables'.<sup>47</sup> But there can be no 'fable' without its own particular array of clichés and verbal conventions notable for their extravagance and self-regard, the purpose of which is to dress up silliness in the

mantle of nobility and majesty. In short, there is no 'fable' in the postcolony without the apparatus to captivate the mind's eye (*l'imaginaire*) with a Gulliverian vision of the *commandement's* deeds—in which the tiny becomes huge, and the familiar strange, accompanied by the emptiest of gestures: here excess and disproportion are the style. As an illustration, consider the following excerpt from a speech given by Mr Henri Bandolo, the former Minister of Information and Culture, during a ceremony marking the appointment of Mr Gervais Mendo Ze as Director General of Cameroon Radio-Television on 31 October 1988:

Four years of experimenting, practising and getting everything ready have gone by since Bamenda's first glimmers of light. Our audience have been fidgeting with impatience. It has become less and less tolerant. It has been waiting for an explosion of creativity and talent—you have been given the fuse, the gunpowder and the match.

All the instruments are tuned, the musicians are in their right places: here you are, before the public, the conductor of a great orchestra. With the magic and authority of your baton, let us hear, crystal-clear, a symphony in harmony with the aspirations of the Cameroonian people, who now, set free by progress, expect ever greater brilliance; in harmony, too, with the choices and ideals of the Cameroonian National Renewal.<sup>48</sup>

Then, after stressing the need to abandon this 'off-beam, uninspired broadcasting in which most programmes consist of distortion, disinformation, obscenity, biased commentary and outrageous gossip-mongering', the Minister added that such practices are 'designed to tarnish the image' of the country. Hence he judged it 'necessary to denounce such misconduct, the bungling and the mistakes due to incompetence and naivety, to narcissism, sloppiness and deceit'.<sup>49</sup>

The concern for rank, the quest for distinction and the insistence of the Minister on due pomp, these are expressed through such rhetorical devices as a liking for repetition and lists, for contrasts between words and things and frequent antitheses, a tendency to exaggerate and indulge systematically in superlatives, a common use of hyperbole and expressions that go way beyond reality, a preference for imprecise propositions and vague generalisations, complete with constant references to the future. In order to be effective, this verbal trance state reaches a point where all that matters is the harmony of the sounds produced, because by and large it is the particular arrangement of sound that brings on a state of 'possession' and triggers the mind's voyaging; the space it creates through violence, though, is, in the postcolony, totally colonised by the *commandement*.

The production of vulgarity, one should add here, needs to be understood as a deliberately cynical operation. It is political in the sense intended by S. Wilentz when he argues that every polity is governed by 'master fictions' which little by little are accepted into the domain of the indisputable (Wilentz, 1985: 4). The postcolonial polity can only produce 'fables' and stupefy its 'subjects', bringing on delirium when the discourse of power penetrates its targets and drives them into the realms of fantasy and hallucination. This is why the rhetorical devices of officialese in the post-colony can be compared to those of communist regimes; that is, to the extent that they are, in both instances, actual regimes given to the produc-

tion of lies and double-speak. For this reason, then, all verbal dissidence, whether written or sung, is the object of close surveillance and repression.

Yesterday the police raided shops in Nairobi and Nakuru on suspicion that they were selling subversive music. They also arrested people selling controversial cassettes and anyone caught listening to them.

The police also confiscated hundreds of cassettes, tape-recorders, guitars and saxophones. The cassettes were of such songs as *Mahoya ma Bururi* ('Prayers for the Country'), 'Who killed Dr Ouko', *Mithima ma Matiba* ('The Tribulations of Matiba'), *Nituhoye Ngai* ('Let us Pray'), 'Patriotic Contributions' and *Thina Uria Wakorir Athini a Gicagi nia Muruoto* ('The Troubles of the Poor of Muruoto'). [Mwai, 1990; see also Mwangi, 1990]

The postcolony is thus characterised by the loss of any limits or sense of proportion. This is illustrated by the following account, which shows the government's disproportionate response to an attempt by some members of opposition groups to lay a bouquet of flowers on the spot where Ernest Ouandié (a leader of the Union des Populations du Cameroun, UPC) was executed in 1971 on the orders of Mr Ahmadou Ahidjo's regime.

On Friday 18th January [1991], a communiqué issued by the Governor of Western Province invited the population to stay at home and to refrain from going into the streets for any reason whatsoever. Troops had been placed on alert since dawn on January 19th. The municipal airport was closely guarded. Surveillance at all strategic points in the city had been increased, and extra vigilance ordered. Anyone remotely suspicious had to be identified and questioned as necessary.

The spot where Ernest Ouandié was executed on the 15th January 1971 was taken over by men in uniform. The place is just behind the BICIC [Banque Internationale du Commerce et de l'Industrie du Cameroun] at Bafoussam and is [today] covered with grass.

. . . The forces of law and order, alerted by the gathering crowds, descended on the site, dispersing the crowd and seizing the bouquet of flowers. [Some people] were arrested by soldiers and taken to the office of the provincial Governor; there they were interrogated [Amassana, 1991]

The significance of sound and hubbub is not limited to speech; it is also manifest in the various 'liturgies' or ceremonies frequently being organised by the state and the party for the masses. But, before examining them in detail, we should note that what is being depicted here as a stereotyped discourse not unlike a *langue de bois*<sup>50</sup> (or cant) is in fact a way of thinking that is peculiar to a closed society in which people's behaviour and opinions are always being censured, and where constant suspicions about people plotting or about possible revolts predisposes the public to denouncing and exposing anyone they suspect. Cant then becomes a local genre, coherent and codified, in which actions and events are strung together in a fantastic—yet fully rational (by its own criteria, that is)—manner so as to make the implausible plausible.

The dramatisation of the postcolonial *commandement* takes place especially during those ceremonies which make up the state's liturgical calendar. Indeed, after decolonisation Cameroon consciously developed a ceremonial system which, in many respects, recalls ones that operated in communist regimes (see Binns, 1979, 1980; McDowell, 1974; and especially Lane,

1981). The system of festivals institutionalised during the Ahidjo regime (1958–82) was very like communist ceremonials in the way it took on para-religious and dogmatic features both of which were to be most easily found in the general economy of public life. The ceremonies organised during the last ten years of Ahidjo's reign always produced an intense degree of emotional and symbolic expression. They had a repetitive character typical of myth and of cyclical time. In the end, their very regularity invested them with the power of custom. 'Massive, spontaneous and enthusiastic' participation was expected of the masses. The official calendar marked the different sequences of social time (see Leach, 1976; Lukes, 1975; Cushman, 1988; Binns, 1989). The regime ultimately created its own rhythms of time, work and leisure, and from them acquired a degree of predictability. For example, it was well known that every important victory achieved in pan-African sporting competitions (especially soccer) was almost automatically the occasion for a 'national holiday on full pay'.

At the same time the regime tried to invent for itself a genealogy that served to compensate for the lack of legitimacy which marked the early years of decolonisation. In 1958 the French colonial administration had decided it was in its long-term interest to distance itself from the nationalist movement and to ensure that instead its own local clients got the resources of power that would become available at independence (see Mbembe 1989a or 1986). This attempt to legitimate a political order born amidst contempt gave rise to a certain amount of violence being done to the facts and the historical figures of the nationalist period. The state's obsession with remaking the past in its own image remains one of the most conspicuous characteristics of the regimes that have come to power in Cameroon since the colonial era.

It was during Ahidjo's presidency that the practice was started of putting up portraits of the head of state in public places. Admittedly no statutes have been erected in Ahidjo's honour, but the largest stadium in the capital and some of the main boulevards and public spaces were named after him while he was alive. Formerly an employee of the colonial postal service, he was nevertheless awarded a doctorate *honoris causa* by the local university. 'Votes of confidence' (*motions de soutien*) are also products of this period. They added to a personality cult which also found expression in the various titles that Ahidjo's courtiers gave him: 'Father of the Nation', 'Great Comrade', 'Apostle of Peace', 'Providential Guide', 'Indefatigable Builder of the Nation', 'The Man of February 1958', 'The Great Peasant', 'The Great Sportsman', 'Far-sighted Guide', 'The Great Helmsman' . . .

The artificiality of the practice of singing praises was revealed in 1984 when, after a plot to overthrow the President had been discovered, Ahidjo was tried *in absentia* and condemned to death, then pardoned. In 1989 he died in Dakar (Senegal). His successor thought it inopportune to bury him in the country he had led for a quarter of a century. Until recently the regime that succeeded him made every effort to banish him from official memory in the same way that Ahidjo himself had organised the relegation of the leaders of the nationalist resistance to oblivion (Mbembe, 1989b). Here in the postcolony it is not just the people (*la plèbe*) who manipulate the past or commit 'theophagy'.

Paul Biya's regime inherited these practices. Under his rule they were routinised and even intensified; new ones were invented. For example, in an effort to illustrate the omnipresence of the *commandement* in the furthest corners of daily life, a medallion featuring the head of state accompanied by a 'thought for the day' is published daily on the front page of the sole official newspaper, the *Cameroon Tribune*. This is not only an indication of the fact that in a postcolony power functions within an immense universe in which self-adulation goes hand in hand with the claim of possessing the truth. But the fetish (here the effigy of the autocrat) is thus omnipresent, along with the amulets (the identity card, the party card, tax receipts, a mass of papers, authorisations, licence, permits) without which moving around in the postcolony is difficult.

Here in the land of 'President for Life' H. Kamuzu Banda everybody knows exactly who's in charge. From the tiniest village to the capital city, the ubiquitous mark of 'His Excellency's' authority is plain for all to see. Expecting visitors in Malawi or planning to fly to another country? You have to travel first along the Great Kamuzu Processional Road on your way to Kamuzu International Airport. Feeling sick or desire to take in a ball game? Try the Kamuzu College of Nursing or the Kamuzu Stadium and Fitness Complex. Hoping to give your child a decent education? The only good school is the Kamuzu Academy, the leading preparatory school in the nation. But be prepared to spend for tuition lots of Malawi kwacha, the local money imprinted with Banda's face. [Henry, 1991]

It is therefore not unusual to find the effigy of the head of state in or around people's houses. It is part of the furniture as well as a decorative object. It is found in offices, along avenues, in airport terminals, in police stations and in places of torture. It is always near by. You wear it. It is on people's bodies, as in the case of women who wear the party's cloths. In this way, and with great attention to detail, the apparatus of state finds ways of getting into its subjects' most intimate spaces.

Besides celebrating Paul Biya's rise to power every 6 November, during his reign a new holiday has been added to the calendar. Until recently its purpose was to exalt the party. It was first held in April 1989 in Bertoua, in Eastern Province. It lasted for three days, during which time people danced to the rhythm of xylophones and drums. Sports competitions were organised and speeches delivered. The event ended with a five-kilometre 'long march of support' for the head of state around a circuit. Local people participated in the celebration, as did religious, political, administrative and 'traditional' authorities. In his speech Mr Samba Letina, president of the Lom and Djerem section of the party, invited his fellow citizens to support the 'Government of Renewal, thanks to which we enjoy today so many marvels and generous acts . . . and unprecedented, rapid economic, social and cultural development' (Ibrahima, 1989). Though of interest, this art of regulating society is already too well known to deserve further comment.<sup>51</sup>

Consider instead the visits by foreign heads of state, for example. In October 1987 when a reception for Abdou Diouf, the President of Senegal, was to be organised, forty-two dance troupes were brought to the airport several hours before his arrival. Most of the dancers as usual had oblong

cowbells attached to their ankles and above their knees. They were accompanied by drums, tambourines, guitars, xylophones and flutes made from bamboo or from gazelle or antelope horn in different sizes. There were bullroarers and other wind instruments of various shapes and material, some of iron, others made from gourds with necks slotted together—these made a specially deep, hoarse sound. There were percussion instruments, iron gongs and bells made out of metal shells, and tubes whose speciality was a metallic sound to set the rhythm of the dance. Once synchronised together these instruments could bring on possession, ‘enchant’ the dancers or, failing that, deafen the crowd—a necessary magnifier of power.

Earlier the mayor had broadcast his usual communiqué, calling on ‘employers in the public and private sectors to grant leave of absence to their employees so that they may contribute to the success of the occasion with a suitably massive and enthusiastic welcome that would be appropriate for our illustrious guest’.<sup>52</sup> And so a ‘human hedge made up of students in school uniform, party militants and men, women and children of all ages’ was planted along the avenue that leads from the airport to the visitors’ lodge.<sup>53</sup> The procedure was repeated when Ibrahim Babangida, the Nigerian head of state, paid an official visit to Yaoundé; and the ceremonies were even more elaborate for the visits of the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir.

In the world of self-adoration that is the postcolony, the troupes summoned to perform their dances bear witness to the central place accorded the body in the processes of *commandement* and submission. Under colonial rule it was the bodies of convicts and labourers that were requisitioned for public works or for portage (Rudin, 1938). In the postcolony bodies have been used to entertain the powerful in ceremonies and official parades. On such occasions some of the bodies have had the marks of famine upon them: flaky scalps, scabies, skin sores. Other bodies have attracted small crowds of flies. But that has not stopped them from breaking into laughter or peals of joy when the presidential limousines approached. They stamped the ground with their feet, blanketing the air with dust. Wearing the party uniform with the picture of the head of state printed upon it, women followed the rhythm of the music and swung their torsos first forward, then back; elsewhere they pulled in, then thrust out their bellies, their undulating movements evoking as usual the slow, prolonged penetration of the penis and its staccato retreat.<sup>54</sup> Yelling and ululating, gesticulating with bodies contorted, everyone cheers the cavalcade of cars as it passes by, shattering what Rimbaud called ‘the absurd silence of the stammerer’; and everyone is content to sustain a link, if only for a second, of familiarity, of collusion even, with violence and domination in its most heady form.

Power had thus colonised—at least for the moment of official ceremonial—the dances which previously were linked to particular rituals and followed specific rules. Amidst the cacophony accompanying such a show of strength there can be found scattered here and there the debris of ritual actions from the past—here, elements from rites before the hunt to enlist the help of spirits; there, bits of former ceremonies for funerals or initiations, for women’s fertility or of preparation for war. All the elements,

juxtaposed and intertwined in a single web, form the edifice of postcolonial dramaturgy.

The thirst for prestige, honours, deference—along with its corollary, the desire for gratitude—has been incorporated into the liturgies of state since the time of Ahmadou Ahidjo. Ceremonies have become the privileged language through which power speaks, acts, coerces. To ensure the reproduction of such an economy of pleasure, posts and palaces and public places have been filled with a large number of buffoons, fools and clowns at various levels, offering a variety of services—journalists, insiders, clerks, hagiographers, censors, informers, Party hacks expert in eliciting votes of confidence, praise singers of any kind, courtiers, intellectuals in search of an official perch, middlemen . . . Their function is to preach before the fetish the fiction of its perfection. Thanks to them the postcolony has become a world of narcissistic self-gratification. But flattery is not just produced in order to please the despot; it is manufactured in a quest for profit or favours. The aim is to share the table of the autocrat, to ‘eat from his hands’.<sup>55</sup> Hence extraordinary deeds are attributed to him;<sup>56</sup> he is covered in vainglory.<sup>57</sup> Yet here flattery and denunciation are often one and the same: as no obstacle to the fabulous transfiguration of the fetish can be tolerated, sceptics are left to the attentions of the security apparatus—police harassment, withdrawal of passport and various other forms of intimidation.<sup>58</sup> Monsters lurk in the shadows of official ceremony. Protected by the grand portrait of the President of the Republic that hangs on every wall, that marks the junctions of the main avenues, and graces the goals and the torture chambers, an undisciplined army of dishonest police, informers, identity-card inspectors, gendarmes, men in khaki, impoverished soldiery, coerce common people blatantly and seize what they have no right to seize. They practice raw violence. Strictly speaking, it is no longer a question of forcing bodies to be docile or maintaining order. It is not simply a matter of whippings and beatings, which, as we have seen, are the lot of ordinary people in the prisons, police stations and other houses of detention (cf. Bayart, 1977). Instead, it is simply the administration of a summary, barren violence for purposes of appropriation and extortion, as the following letter to the Prefect of Wouri about the road blocks of Douala shows:

M. le Préfet,

. . . It is with great civic deference that I permit myself to distract you from your great responsibilities as head of a county with about two million inhabitants. I am writing to bring your attention to the tribulations of many citizens of your county, the residents of Douala III, who are the daily victims of the immiseration (*miserabilisme*) of the policemen under your command.

Sir, even in Lagos, the most populated and chaotic city in black Africa, peaceful citizens are not as terrorised as we are at the Ndokotti crossroads where every day a pack of police and gendarmes descend upon the cars and vehicles to extort ransom money from drivers caught inextricably in a jam as traffic piles up around a small barrel or a pile of tyres placed in the middle of an intersection and which serves as a traffic light.

They are in blue or in khaki, with white helmets or red or black berets. They arrive in the morning either in uniforms covered with pockets that will be stuffed by the day’s end, or with small handbags to contain the spoils of war till the time

comes to return home, sorry only that the day does not last an eternity. [Sipa, 1990]

What actually happens in reality?

. . . You hear the strident whistle rip the air. You never know who they are summoning or whether and where you should stop until the moment when your door is opened abruptly and you hear: 'Stop the engine! Give me your papers!' (If you are a taxi driver, they use the familiar *tu* [you].) Sometimes an entire cordon encircles your car in the middle of the traffic without giving you time to pull in at the roadside. They do it on purpose because if your car's papers are in order, your tail lights and indicators work all right and your headlights too, your spare tyre is correctly inflated, your extinguisher is brand-new, the first-aid kit is overflowing and even the shopping basket in the back doesn't contain anything subversive . . . they must nonetheless nail you with a charge. It's no problem having to choose between 'obstructing the highway' and 'parking on the pavement'.

Your car's papers and 'personal articles' are retained by the officer, who then and there leaves you with your passengers on board, and goes off to finish his inspection somewhere else. You have to go and join him in order to negotiate the price of your papers and other valuables out of earshot of the passengers. This is because he could never give you a ticket which you simply have to go and pay. But if by chance he did, the charge would be false. If, too, the negotiations last for fifteen minutes or half an hour, you come back to find your vehicle stuck, its tyres flat, the air let out by other officers . . . just like that! [Sipa, 1990]

The link between the *commandement* and its subjects, in its postcolonial as in its colonial form, meant not only control but also connivance. It rested on the tacit, almost invisible assumption that the *commandement* had a right to enjoy everything—which is why, of the various elements that make up postcolonisation, one element is always banditry.

Curiously, M. le Préfet, there is a type of taximan whom the professionals call '*clando*' . . . He seems to circulate like a fish in water even though he has no grey card, no insurance, no driving licence. I noticed that at every road block there are drivers of anonymous vehicles . . . who do not show any document but simply mention a name and pass without even being waved on. I was told that these cars, though driven by private individuals, really belong to senior officers in the police or gendarmerie; hence they are not afraid of going openly about their illicit business. [Sipa, 1990]

The experience of the postcolony makes it clear that illegal activities are not confined to ordinary people. Enforcing regulations, manipulating the system of bribery, collecting taxes and levies, forcibly confiscating goods that have been hoarded and then selling them off—these are characteristic of a situation where there is summary violence as well as looting and extortion whether it be in the form of cash or product or forced labour. Hence, on 7 August 1987, the sanitation service undertook 'a gigantic clean-up of the booths selling drink that had been put up at the roadside, at bus stops and in markets in the city of Yaoundé' on the grounds that they had no traders' licence.

Previously, the same service had to use water cannon to disperse the street sellers on the Avenue du 27 août 1940. Goods from this clean-up were due to go on sale at an auction, with the proceeds going to the district budget. The clean-up

followed a series of warnings given by the Sanitation Department to the owners of the booths and the street sellers who [in the authorities' view] congested the streets and blocked the entrances to shops in the commercial centre. The unlicensed sale of alcoholic drinks had gone on for too long.<sup>59</sup>

To open a cafeteria—or a place to eat in the open; it provides an income for the 'delaboured' (*désœuvrés*, the term the government prefers for the unemployed)—the administration requires authorisation from the mayor of Yaoundé, a medical certificate that needs renewing every eight months and a certificate of hygiene. The sector is dominated by women who are supplementing their husbands' incomes (Sipa, 1990). In the postcolony these ways of making ends meet (*débrouillardise*) involve a wide variety of sectors—bakeries, hotels, garages etc.—and none of them is safe from police harassment. Thus in the same month of August the deputy prefectorial assistant of Mbouda called in the bakers and the hotel proprietors of the city and

banging his fist on the table he railed against the lack of hygiene in the bakeries, drink shops, hotels and garages. Waste water and domestic rubbish are thrown everywhere, and give off a foul stench. Most of the bakers do not have a glass counter to protect the bread from dirt. Even worse, the bread is wrapped in paper from old cement sacks despite the warning given by the head of the Department of Hygiene and Health that cement was unquestionably poisonous. [*Cameroon Tribune*]

Finally, let us end with one last practice. I suggested earlier that the mouth, the belly and the penis constitute the classic ingredients of *commandement* in the postcolony. Yet the process by which pleasure is transformed into a site of death was not adequately examined. I will limit my remarks here to suggesting how, in this context, the very act of exercising command cannot be separated from the way licentiousness is produced. For example, having come to install in their posts the headmaster of the high school and the director of the training college for assistant instructors at Abong-Mbang in January 1988, the prefect of the department of Haut Nyong, Ename Ename Samson, urged the teachers to 'have only pedagogic and healthy, not intimate and culpable, relationships with their students' (Okala, 1988). The prefect was well aware of the excessive rights to take women that bureaucrats arrogate to themselves—as we saw earlier in the reference, from S. Labou Tansi, to soldiers who spend most of their time 'pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls'. 'Soldiers of the phallus and the nightclub,' says that novelist. One can add to them the Ministers who explore virgins on hotel beds and the priests who turn somersaults over the 'deep behinds' of young girls and, while digging a 'delicious void in their bellies, make them cry out the final ho-hi-hi-hi'. Not to mention the real 'kings of the bush'—the sub-prefects and prefects, the police officers and gendarmes—who have practically unlimited rights over those under them (*droits de cuissage*).

These 'rights' exempt acts of copulation from inclusion in the category of what is 'shameful'. It would certainly be pointless to try and contrast the postcolonial bureaucrat's desire for sexual pleasure with normal erotic activity. In the postcolony diverse forms of *cuissage* and rights pertaining to them, the concern to reproduce and the overabundant life of the flesh

complement one another, even if the ecstasy of the organs, the excesses of fine food and drink so characteristic of such an economy of pleasure are an integral part of a larger world—the world of Sade. An example is the story of Mr Jean-Marie Effa, a master in the primary school at Biyem-Assi who was convicted of having regularly had intercourse with the young girls in his class:

The incident took place in the second term of the school year 1989/90. [Jean-Marie Effa had told the girl] to go and wait for him at the school toilets, which the child had done without question (everyone knows the control teachers have over children at that age). When he got there, the master undressed, put his trousers and pants to one side and his penis in her mouth. After a few moments he ejaculated. The child said that a white fluid came out. The girl spat it out and made herself vomit.

I could mention too the way bureaucrats harass students at school exits, honking their car horns behind schoolgirls walking down the street, cruising up to them, stopping and opening their doors to invite them to sit in the ‘seat of death’. The everyday life of the postcolonial bureaucrat consists of the following: alcohol, amusements, lewd propositions and bawdy comments in which the virtue of women comes under scrutiny by allusions to the sexual organs of office secretaries and the prowess of declared favourites and young mistresses. Hence the frequent remarks about the ‘heat of thighs’ or the ‘miraculous properties of their cowl’; hence, too, the vigorous attraction of virgins. Is this why a character in one of Sony Labou Tansi’s novels utters, ‘it makes a soft sound, a virgin on the other end, that delicious moan’.<sup>60</sup>

The world of Sade is seen in the word play and sexual practices in which the agents of the *commandement* indulge. At the start of this article I mentioned how ‘the powerful key of Eyadéma penetrates the “lock” to the applause of the Togolese people’. I should add that lusty sovereigns of the postcolony have peopled their countries with an unknown number of children (Tansi, 1983). Such practices no longer refer back to customs which in some past societies made it discourteous to leave guests to sleep alone without offering a girl to ‘warm their feet’ during the night—a practice from which the colonial settlers and their successors greatly profited. And it has even less connection with the large-scale polygamy of the years of transition to colonial rule, the function of which was more economic and social—creating alliances with those in power, cementing relationships, producing and reproducing. The problem instead is how, in the postcolony, these baroque practices have become an integral part of the bureaucrat’s life style, how the economy of pleasure has become inseparable from vice.

#### THE INTIMACY OF TYRANNY<sup>61</sup>

Though the effectiveness of what Foucault calls the ‘politics of coercion’ should not be underestimated, it is important not to lose sight of the way in which it can actually lessen the burden of subjection and overdetermine how the ‘normal’ is constructed. Precisely because the postcolonial mode of domination is a regime that involves not just control but conviviality, even

connivance—as shown by the constant compromises, the small tokens of fealty, people's inherent cautiousness—the analyst must watch out for the myriad ways in which ordinary people guide, deceive and actually toy with power instead of confronting it directly.

These evasions (as endless as Sisyphus's) 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 here of capture and narrow escape, nor the way the traps are so interconnected that they become a unitary system of ensnarement. Yet on making sense of this network depends any knowledge we might have of the logics of 'resistance', 'disorder'<sup>62</sup> and conviviality that are all inherent in the postcolonial form of authority.

For the present it is enough to observe that at any given moment in the postcolonial historical trajectory the authoritarian mode can no longer be interpreted strictly in terms of search operations, surveillance or 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 obscenity is only another aspect of munificence and vulgarity a normal condition of state power. If subjection appears more intense than it might be, it is because the subjects of the *commandement* have internalised 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 whole political economy of the body. It is also because, were they to detach themselves from these ludic resources, they would, as subjects, 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, dresses in the party uniform, fills the roads, 'assembles *en masse*' along the main avenues to applaud the passing of the presidential procession in a ritual of confirmation, is nonetheless willing to dramatise 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 effrontery of elites, this body breaks into laughter. And by laughing it drains officialdom of meaning and sometimes obliges it to function empty and powerless. This is what allows us to assert that, by dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the 'postcolonised subject' is providing 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 reaffirming that it is incontestable—precisely in order the better to play with it and modify it whenever possible.

Thus the public affirmation of the 'postcolonised subject' is not necessarily found in acts of 'opposition' or 'resistance' to the *commandement*. What defines the postcolonised subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices which are fundamentally ambiguous, fluid and modifiable even in instances where there are clear, written and precise rules. These simul-

taneous yet apparently contradictory practices ratify, *de facto*, the status of fetish that state power so forcefully 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. This means that the recognition of state power as a fetish is significant only at the very heart of the ludic relationship. It is here that the official 'sign' or 'sense' is most easily 'unpacked', 'disenchanted' and gently repacked, and pretence (*le simulacre*) 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 and covering over, 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 erase the dominated from the epistemological field of power.<sup>63</sup>

Consider, for example, ceremonies for the 'transfer of office' which punctuate postcolonial bureaucratic time and profoundly affect the imagination of individuals, elites and masses alike. One such ceremony took place in October 1987 in the small town of Mbankomo in Central Province. Mr Essomba Ntonga Godfroy, the 'newly elected' municipal administrator, was to be 'installed in his post', along with his two assistants, Mr Andre 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 as municipal advisers were handed to the three elected on 25 October. 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—it was a celebration of democracy renewed. [Essono, 1987: 11]

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 reminded the audience of his sporting successes.<sup>64</sup> But it was at the installation of Mr Pokossy Ndoumbe as head of the borough of Douala that the most detailed introduction was given:

Mr Pokossy Ndoumbe first saw the light of day on 21 August 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 at Coulonniers. He passed the baccalaureat in experimental science in 1954 at the Michelet high school in Vanves. He was drawn to pharmacological 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 a houseman at the Emile Roux Hospital in Brevannes before returning to his native country in January 1960. [Bissi, 1989]

Such attention to detail should not come as a surprise; it is part of the

system of 'distinction'.<sup>65</sup> 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 show off their titles—doctor, chief, president, etc.—with great affectation as a way of claiming honour, glory and attention. Displays of this kind have an effect beyond the contribution they make to state ritual. Such a display is transformative: by casting its rays upon the person installed it bestows upon him a new radiance. In the hierarchy of mock honours the description of scholarly achievements constitutes a marker of rank and status as well as of qualification.<sup>66</sup>

Another 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 dark-red medals and 1,682 silver medals. The medals, which were obtained from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, cost CFA11,500 each for the gold ones, CFA10,500 for the dark-red and CFA8,500 for the silver ones. Apart from this, businesses gave 'contributions' to the recipients of the medals to help with family festivities (Owona, 1989b). The family celebrations included 'libations, feasting and various extravagances [which] are the norm in such circumstances' (Ntete, 1989). Certainly one could be disturbed simply by the lavishness of the expenditure, since it is rare to find a recipient of a medal who is not heavily in debt the day after the celebrations. But that would be to overlook the point that in this context the granting of a medal is a political act through which bureaucratic relations are transformed into clientelist networks where pleasures, privileges and resources are distributed in exchange for political compliance.<sup>67</sup> The lavish distribution of food and other marks of generosity are of interest only to the extent that they make relations of superiority manifest; what circulates are not just gifts but tokens creating networks of indebtedness and subordination (see Mauss, 1969).

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.<sup>68</sup>

In the postcolony magnificence and the desire to shine are not the prerogative only of 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, smoking, sexual relations and saying anything that goes against the Muslim faith and the law. Last Saturday marked the end of these privations for the whole Muslim community of Cameroon. [Simgba, 1989]

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 characterised above all by scarcity, the metaphor of food

'lends itself to the wide-angle lens of both imagery and efficacy' (Guyer, 1991). 'Food' and 'tips' (*pourboire*) are political,<sup>69</sup> 'food', like 'scarcity', cannot be dissociated from particular regimes of 'death', from specific modalities of enjoyment or therapeutic quests (cf. Taussig, 1988). This is why 'the night' (de Rosny, 1977) and 'witchcraft' (Geschiere, 1988), the 'invisible' (Bonnafé, 1978), the 'belly', the 'mouth' (Brown, 1983) and 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 . . . [Owona, 1989a]

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. [Tagne, 1989]

Do not 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—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, it's 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' made with customs officials, and the game is on. [Zok, 1989]

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 'constraints of giving' (Veyne, 1976: 230). They are also taken by the desire to 'die well' and to be buried with pomp.<sup>70</sup> Funerals constitute one of the occasions where those who command gaze at themselves, as Narcissus did.<sup>71</sup> 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 Governor of the then 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 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 (Mbonwoh, 1987). Here power's sanction penetrated to the very manner in which the dead man was buried. It thus appears that those who command seek to familiarise 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 South Western Province to pay its last respects to the deceased:

At Muyuka, Ebonji, Tombel and Nyasoso, primary and secondary school students formed human hedges several hundred metres long. When the body arrived in Kumba, the main town of Meme, the entire 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 over 120,000 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 organise the funeral programme. [Bakoa, 1989]

As we have seen, obscenity—when regarded as more than a moral category—constitutes one of the modalities of power in the postcolony. But it is also one of the arenas in which subordinates reaffirm or subvert that power. Bakhtin's error was to attribute these practices to the dominated. But the production of burlesque is not specific to them. The real inversion takes place when, in their desire for a certain majesty, the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power so as to reproduce its epistemology; and when, too, power in its own violent quest for grandeur makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence. It is here, within the confines of this intimacy, that the forces of tyranny in black 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 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 that are the situations of violence *par excellence*.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have in mind his understanding of the way in which 'non-official' cultures invert and desecrate 'official' values in carnivalesque activities. Cf. Bakhtin (1970a); for a recent critique, Lachmann (1987–89).

<sup>2</sup> 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' (1979: 41). Other examples of this insight into the postcolony are found in Tansi (1988) and Ly (1982).

<sup>3</sup> I owe this manner of problematisation to Castoriadis (1975: 475).

<sup>4</sup> I use the notion of *cible* in the sense indicated by Foucault (1989) when, in response to the question of 'what constitutes the art of governing' he delineates objects of power as, on the one hand, a territory and, on the other, the people who live in the territory, or the population. *Cible* thus designates 'the people who live' in the postcolony. [The over-literal translation of *cible* as 'target subjects' will hereafter be rendered simply as 'subjects'.—*Translator*.]

<sup>5</sup> On these complex questions cf. Bayart (1985).

<sup>6</sup> The poverty of the hypotheses which guide a number of studies is telling in this regard, in that the question posed by such research is limited to the problem of knowing whether or not the acts they describe and interpret are inscribed in a process of either resistance or accommodation to the established order; of 'engagement' or 'disengagement' with regard to the field of domination; or, more crudely, whether such movements are 'conservative' or 'progressive'. For some recent efforts to overcome these impasses see Azarya and Chazan

(1987) and Rothchild and Chazan (1987). Some of the limitations of these works are made evident by Roitman (1990). See also Scott (1985).

<sup>7</sup> I use the term *commandement* in the way it was used to denote colonial authority, that is, in so far 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 of the authoritarian modality *par excellence*. On the colonial theorisation of this mode see, for example, Delavignette (1950) or, more generally, Cohen (1971). [The French term is retained in the translation.—*Translator.*]

<sup>8</sup> On the notion of the 'fetish' as applied in the African context cf. *Nouvelle revue de psychoanalyse* (1970), particularly the contributions by J. Pouillon, A. Adler and P. Bonnafé, pp. 131–94.

<sup>9</sup> See, in respect of Zaire, Callaghy (1986).

<sup>10</sup> See the examples in Schatzberg (1988).

<sup>11</sup> The point is demonstrated in Bristol's (1985) study of the carnival in England during the Renaissance. For other commentaries see Falassi (1987), Poole (1990).

<sup>12</sup> This is amply demonstrated in the work of Berry (e.g. 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Understood as the institutionalised forms adopted by a regime of domination in seeking to legitimise violent practices.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Susan Roitman (personal communication, 24 August 1991) for this apt metaphor.

<sup>15</sup> This simplistic dichotomy is taken up by Scott (1990). It also strongly marks recent East European sociological work; see, for example, Hankiss (1988). Binary categories are likewise to be found in Comaroff (1985).

<sup>16</sup> The subtitle derives partly from Parkin (1980: 45), who uses the term in the context of ritualised verbal exchanges whereas I am taking it to interpret more strictly defined political situations. Cf. Toulabor (1981, 1986: especially 302–9).

<sup>17</sup> *Cameroon Tribune* 4778, 4 December 1990, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> See, in this respect, Schatzberg's (1988) analysis of the state as 'eye' and 'ear'.

<sup>19</sup> For a case study of the specificity of this notion see Joseph (1988).

<sup>20</sup> For another instance of poaching on the rhetorical territories of a pseudo-revolutionary regime—this time Burkina Faso under Sankara—see Dubuch (1985).

<sup>21</sup> [The sense of dismemberment is the essence of this verb.—*Translator.*]

<sup>22</sup> On the anthropological significance of 'the belly' in southern Cameroon see Guimera (1981). For a political interpretation of the same metaphor see Bayart (1989).

<sup>23</sup> This is starkly evident in the colonial African novel, e.g. the classic Oyono (1957).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the accounts of the use of family and parental metaphors in Zaire, and in Cameroon under the regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo, in Schatzberg (1988, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> I am extrapolating for my own purposes from an argument developed in another context by Tonkin (1979).

<sup>26</sup> 'Police beat up man over flag', *The Standard* 23547, 8 February 1990, pp. 1–2.

<sup>27</sup> On this intimacy and domesticity—the way in which the 'fetish' adheres to the corporeality of the citizens, decorates their houses, invades the stadiums, marks clothing, is flattered and nourished in song; in short, colonises all the ways of everyday life—see Ela (1990: 52–8).

<sup>28</sup> Compare this conspicuous consumption with the ethos of prestige and the system of expenditure in the courtly society of Europe as revealed by Elias (1983: 42–65; also chapter IV on the etiquette and logic of prestige).

<sup>29</sup> A point well argued by Stallybrass and White (1989), especially at p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> As does, for example, Scott (1989).

<sup>31</sup> See, from this perspective, Gandolou's (1989) description of the *sapeurs* of Congo-Brazzaville.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Hegel, 1975.

<sup>33</sup> An example is the case against Célestin Monga and the newspaper *le Messager* for having allegedly 'insulted the head of state' in January–February 1991.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. what Bakhtin (1970b; 155) calls the 'official monologism', the naive pretension to possess a 'whole truth'.

<sup>35</sup> I reappropriate, at my own risk, an interpretive rubric 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 the details see Kott (1970); also Bataille (1962).

<sup>36</sup> This account is from the *Gazette* (Douala) 589, September 1987.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault (1975: 9–11). [The spectacle of Damiens's end provoked vivid eye-witness accounts: in Paris in 1757, by royal command, the would-be regicide was slowly and clumsily tortured to death in public, the climax being an attempt to tear him limb from limb with six horses while he was still alive.]

<sup>38</sup> See the case of Kayembe Beleji of Zaire. In 1953 he was taken on as a lumberjack by a Belgian sawmill at Cisamba. He refused to take his wife there because of rumours 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 face down; I received twenty-five strokes on the left buttock twenty-five on the 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' (Jewsiewicki, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> On Kenya, see the headlines in the newspapers during the riots that followed the government's refusal to move towards a multi-party 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 crack down on hooligans' . . .

<sup>40</sup> I am borrowing an insight from the title of Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: a study of eroticism and the taboo* (1962).

<sup>41</sup> *Cameroon Tribune* 4235, 5 October 1988.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> For historical and sociological perspectives on the successive political regimes of Cameroon see Joseph (1986), Bayart (1977), Ngayap (1984).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. 'Deux nouveaux ambassadeurs accrédités au Cameroun. Egards mérités', *Cameroon Tribune* 4252, 28 October 1988.

<sup>46</sup> *Cameroon Tribune* 4384, 9 May 1989, p. 2. For a more explicit account of the 'increasingly assured prestige' that Cameroon and 'her President' supposedly derive from his frequent visits abroad and from the radiance thus bestowed on Cameroon in the 'international arena' see Mama (1989).

<sup>47</sup> This dimension of power is well interpreted in the postcolonial African novel. See also Bigo (1989: 58–64, 143–71). For other cases see Schatzberg (1988) or Callaghy (1986).

<sup>48</sup> Bandolo (1988). For another example of such verbiage with a pseudo-academic allure see Ndongo (1990).

<sup>49</sup> We must denounce them, he emphasised, 'not only because of their untoward effects but to curse them and exorcise them as evil-doers, as fakes'. *Cameroon Tribune* 4264, 15 November 1982.

<sup>50</sup> For an analysis of these types of verbal performance cf. Thom (1987).

<sup>51</sup> For an analysis of such ceremonies see Fauré (1978), Lane (1981).

<sup>52</sup> *Cameroon Tribune* 3981, 2 October 1987.

<sup>53</sup> Bakoa (1987). The article also describes the clothing worn by Mrs Diouf (a red skirt and a green, red and black blouse) and Mrs Biya (a yellow silk dress).

<sup>54</sup> A description of the customary dances of the Beti of southern Cameroon may be found in Laburthe-Tolra (1981: 310 ff.).

<sup>55</sup> The point is well noted by Kom (1991).

<sup>56</sup> Examples of such practices during the regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo range from Alima (1977) and Doumba (1982) to Eno-Belinga (1976).

<sup>57</sup> For the regime of Paul Biya see, for example, Etian (1988).

<sup>58</sup> This, for example, is the solution proposed by Ndjana (1985).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Cameroon Tribune* 3981, 2 October 1987. For Senegal see Collignon (1984).

<sup>60</sup> A situation reminiscent of the French monarchy under the *ancien régime*; see Antoine (1986: 293–313).

<sup>61</sup> Here I adapt the title of the French translation of Sennet (1977), *Les Tyrannies de l'intimité*. [In the original 'The tyrannies of intimacy' is the title of the conclusion.]

<sup>62</sup> Understood here in the sense used by Boudon (1981).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. the metaphor of cat and mouse used by Canetti (1988: 281–2).

<sup>64</sup> We are told, *inter alia*, that he was a former champion and holder of the 400 m record (50.1 seconds) in Cameroon, winning a gold medal at the francophone school and in a university competition in May 1957. Bissi (1989).

<sup>65</sup> See Bourdieu (1979), especially the section on struggles over symbols.

<sup>66</sup> On the regulation of rites and of private conduct, as well as the notion of a 'code of circulation/distinction', cf. Goffman (1959: 17–76.)

<sup>67</sup> Leach (1954) has already shown how the rules of a system can be manipulated in order to maximise prestige and social status (pp. 155–6, 183–90).

<sup>68</sup> *Cameroon Tribune* 4391, 18 May 1989, p. 14. For a similar instance see the report of the ceremonies attendant upon the decoration of army officers, *Cameroon Tribune* 4371, 18 April 1989, and for a theoretical perspective Hatch (1989), though Hatch confines himself to a dichotomy between materialist and non-materialist approaches.

<sup>69</sup> Understood here in the sense intended by Bayart (1989), who draws on the Foucaultian notion of *gouvernementalité* to define the *gouvernementalité du ventre* (belly politics) of black Africa.

<sup>70</sup> See the comments of Omoruyi (1988).

<sup>71</sup> But they are also among the situations where the innumerable conflicts connected with inequality and the distribution of inheritance are played out. On this point see Vidal (1987), Gilbert (1988).

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#### Abstract

The exercise of power in African states since independence—generalised here under the term the 'postcolony'—has been marked by a liking for ceremonial and by an exhibitionism that is the more remarkable seeing how illusory are the states' practical achievements. Furthermore, power is exercised with a degree of violence and naked exploitation that has its antecedents in previous colonial regimes.

People's response is a ribaldry that revels in the obscene. The general question is why this power, despite its obvious limitations, is seemingly so effective. More specifically, why does the population apparently collude with its government; how can it laugh at the antics of its rulers and yet at the same time join in celebrating them? The argument put forward here along with evidence mainly from Cameroon and Togo is that, if analysis focuses on the detailed processes and rituals of collusion, it becomes clear that there is an intimacy, an almost domestic familiarity, in the relationship between ruler and ruled which effectively disarms both and turns power-play into performance.

### *Résumé*

L'exercice du pouvoir dans les états africains depuis l'Indépendance—généralisée ici sous le terme de "post-colonisation"—a été marqué par un penchant pour les cérémonies et par un esprit d'apparat plus surprenant quand l'on considère le caractère et combien illusoire sont des grands travaux réalisés par ces états. De plus, le pouvoir est appliqué à un degré de violence et de pure exploitation dont l'on trouve les antécédents dans les précédents régimes coloniaux. Le peuple réagit par la voie de l'indécence qui s'exprime dans des festivités obscènes. La question générale est de comprendre la raison pour laquelle ce pouvoir, en dépit de ses limites évidentes, a semble-t-il autant de portée. Et plus précisément, pourquoi la population joue-t-elle apparemment le jeu de son gouvernement ? Comment peut-elle à la fois se moquer des simagrées de ses gouvernants et toutefois prendre part à leur célébration? L'argumentation soutenue ici, d'après les faits tirés principalement du Cameroun et du Togo, explique que, si l'on centre l'analyse sur les procédés détaillés et les rituels de cette concertation, il devient clair qu'il se produit une intimité, un lien presque familial, dans la relation entre gouvernants et gouvernés, ce qui désarme efficacement les deux camps et met le jeu du pouvoir en représentation.