

The Aesthetics of Vulgarity

In this chapter, I shall examine the banality of power in the postcolony. Banality of power does not simply refer 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 routine is made up of repeated daily actions and gestures. Instead, I refer here to those elements of the obscene and the grotesque that Mikhail Bakhtin claims to have located in “non-official” cultures but that, in fact, are intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed.¹

The notion “postcolony” identifies specifically a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves. To be sure, the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic; it has nonetheless an internal coherence. It is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes. It is not, however, just an economy of signs in which power is mirrored and *imagined* self-reflectively. The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation.² But the postcolony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that, once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence.³ In this sense, the postcolony is a partic-

ularly 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 state power (1) *creates*, through administrative and bureaucratic practices, its own world of meanings—a master code that, while becoming the society’s primary central code, ends by governing, perhaps paradoxically, the logics that underlie all other meanings within that society; (2) attempts to institutionalize this world of meanings as a “socio-historical world”⁴ and to make that world 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,”⁵ but also by integrating it into the period’s consciousness.

The basic argument in this chapter is that, 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 vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalization vs. detotalization. These oppositions are not helpful;⁶ rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations.⁷ In the postcolony, the *commandement*⁸ seeks to institutionalize itself, to achieve legitimation and hegemony (*recherche hégémonique*), in the form of a *fetish*.⁹ The signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the *commandement* produces are meant not merely to be symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge. 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;¹⁰ but they also resort, if necessary, to the systematic application of pain. The basic goal is not just to bring a specific political consciousness into being, but to make it effective. We therefore need to examine: how the world of meanings thus produced is ordered; the types of institutions, the knowledges, norms, and practices structuring this new “common sense”; 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 that undermine officialdom by showing how arbitrary and vulner-

able is *officialesse* and by turning it all into an object of ridicule.¹¹ 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 chapter; we need 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 that state power organizes for dramatizing 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 understand that the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandement* and its "subjects" having to share the same living space. Precisely this logic—the necessary familiarity and domesticity in the relationship—explains why there has not been (as might be expected from those so dominated) the resistance or the accommodation, the disengagement or the "refusal to be captured"¹², the contradiction between overt acts and gestures in public and covert responses "underground" (*sous maquis*). Instead, this logic has resulted in the mutual "zombification" of both the dominant and those apparently dominated. This zombification means that each has robbed the other of vitality and left both impotent (*impouvoir*).

The examples to be offered indeed suggest that the postcolony is made up not of one "public space" but of several, each having its own logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain contexts; hence, the postcolonial subject has to learn to bargain in this conceptual marketplace. Further, subjects in the postcolony also have to have marked ability to manage not just a single identity, but several—flexible enough to negotiate as and when necessary.¹³

If there is such a "postcolonial subject," he/she is publicly visible only where the two activities overlap—in the common daily rituals that ratify the *commandement's* own institutionalization as a fetish to which the subject is bound, and in the subject's deployment of a talent for play, of a sense of fun, that makes him *homo ludens par excellence*. It is this practice that enables subjects to splinter their identities and to represent themselves as always changing their persona; they are constantly undergoing mitosis, whether in "official" space or not.¹⁴ Hence, it would seem wrong 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.”)¹⁵

EXCESS AND THE CREATIVITY OF ABUSE¹⁶

A few additional remarks are necessary. First is the question of use of the grotesque and the obscene toward 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, citizens developed ways of separating words or phrases from their conventional meanings and using them in quite another sense. He illustrates how they thus built a whole vocabulary, equivocal and ambiguous, parallel to the official discourse.¹⁷ Togo was until recently the perfect example of a postcolonial construction; official discourse made use of all necessary means to maintain the fiction of a society devoid of conflict. Postcoloniality could be seen behind the facade of a polity in which the state considered itself simultaneously as indistinguishable from society and as the upholder of the law and keeper of the truth. The state was embodied in a single person, the president. He alone controlled the law, and he could, on his own, grant or abolish liberties—since these are, after all, malleable. In a 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.”¹⁸

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 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 administratively repressed 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, and the way people played with, and manipulated, these images—and people did so not just well away from officialdom, out of earshot or sight of power,¹⁹ but also within the arenas where they were publicly gathered to confirm state legitimacy.

Thus there were avenues of escape from the *commandement*, and for longer or shorter periods of time, whole areas of social discourse eluded control. Such verbal acts offer good examples, excellent indices, of what could be considered commonplace (and hence banal). When Togolese were called upon to shout the party slogans, many would travesty the

metaphors meant to glorify 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 prebendalization of their state after 1982, when Ahidjo had resigned and been replaced constitutionally by his former Prime Minister.²⁰ The “poaching” of meanings could go much further. For example, the Togolese party acronym, RPT, was identified with the “sound of fecal matter dropping into a septic tank” or “the sound of a fart emitted by quivering buttocks,” which “can only smell disgusting.”²¹ “Cut it up and dole it out!” (*redépécer*)²² was preferred by Cameroonians, who thus gave another meaning to the name of the former sole party, the RDPC (Rassemblement Démocratique 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, common metaphors in the vernacular terminologies of power (see Bayart, 1989).

The obsession with orifices, odors, and genital organs came to dominate Togolese popular laughter. But the same can also be found in writings and speech in other sub-Saharan countries. For instance, 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 insisting 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.²³

The emphasis on orifices and protuberances must especially be understood in relation to two factors. The first derives from the *commandement* in the postcolony having a marked taste for lecherous living. Festivities and celebrations are the two key vehicles for indulging this taste, but the idiom of its organization and its symbolism focus, above all, on

the mouth, the belly, and the phallus.²⁴ It is not enough, however, in this context of postcolonial *gouvernementalité* (to use Foucault's terms), to bring into play the mouth, the belly, or the phallus, or to refer to them, to be automatically obscene. "Mouth," "belly," "phallus," used in popular speech and jokes, must be located in the real world, in real time, as play, as fun, as mockery. They are active statements about the human condition, and contribute integrally to the making of political culture in the postcolony. Every reference to these three body parts is consequently a discourse on the world and on death, a means of auto-interpretation, and of negotiating that interpretation and the forces that may shape it.

Beyond specifically the mouth, belly, and phallus, the body is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power. If indeed it is the festivities and celebrations that are the vehicles for giving expression to the *commandement* and for staging its displays of magnificence and prodigality, then the body in question is first a body that eats and drinks, and second a body that is open—in both ways: hence the significance given to orifices, and the central part they play in people's political humor.

Togolese references to the "loud fart" or "fecal matter," Cameroonians' reiteration of *redépéçage*, or the oft-cited "a goat grazes wherever it is tied up," all recall the mouth and the belly at the same time they celebrate the great feasts of food and drink, setting the pattern not only of official banquets but also of the more banal yet major occasions of daily life—purchase of traditional titles, weddings, promotions and appointments, awarding of medals. The obesity of men in power, their impressive physique or, more crudely, the flow of shit from such a physique—all these appeal to people who can enjoy themselves with mockery and laughter, and, sometimes, even join in the feast. Thus they become part of a system of signs that the *commandement* leaves, like tracks, as it passes, and so make it possible to follow the trail of violence and domination intrinsic to the *commandement*. One can thus find these 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 victims, between teachers and pupils.

Is it enough that the postcolonial subject, as a *homo ludens*, is simply making fun of the *commandement*, making it an object of derision, (as would seem 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 the value, at least, it gives itself.²⁵ In the end, whether the encounter of state and people is "masked" or

not, does not matter. The key point is that, in this 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, 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, decrees and commands, the public notices and communiqués repeat over and over: these are the primary signifiers, it is these that have force, that get interpreted and reinterpreted, and feed further significance back into the system.

The question of whether humor in the postcolony is an expression of “resistance” or not, whether it is, a priori, opposition, or simply manifestation of hostility toward authority, is thus of secondary importance. For the most part, those 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—although, to everyone’s amusement, the official line may treat it as such; instead, people see 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 is not that they do not obey or 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; this 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.²⁶ This is why, too, the postcolony is, par excellence, a hollow pretense, 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 wearing uniforms and carrying the party card, making public gestures of support and hanging portraits of the autocrat in one’s home; (2) to say the unsayable and to recognize the otherwise unrecognizable. In other words, the fetish, seen for the sham it is, is made to lose its might and becomes a mere artifact.

Although the emphasis on orifices and the like in popular humor is due to the *commandement*’s predilection for lechery, the point would be lost if we took this humor as simply an aspect of a rather crude, primitive culture. Rather, defecation, copulation, pomp, and extravagance are classical ingredients in the production of power, and there is nothing

specifically African about this; the obsession with orifices results from the fact that, in the postcolony, the *commandement* is constantly engaged in projecting an image of itself and of the world—a fantasy it presents its subjects as a truth beyond dispute, a truth to be instilled into them so that they acquire a habit of discipline and obedience.²⁷ The *commandement* aspires to act as a total cosmology for its subjects—yet, owing to the very oddity of this cosmology, popular humor causes it, often quite unintentionally, to capsize.

What gives rise to conflict is not the frequent references to the genital organs of those in power, but rather the way individuals, 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, but that ordinary people bring to its attention, often unwittingly.²⁸ The following incident from Kenya shows how these elements can go well beyond the limits of fun:

A woman from Busia was recently exposed to an agonizing experience as she helplessly watched the police beat her husband with their batons. As she wept and pleaded with the police to spare her husband, the police ordered the couple to take off their shoes. According to the police, the man was punished for failing to stand to attention while the national flag was being lowered.

The incident took place last 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.²⁹

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 artifact, an artifact that is a familiar friend, a member of the family, for the rulers as for the ruled.³⁰ This double act of distancing and domesticating is not necessarily the expression of a fundamental conflict between worlds of meaning that are in principle antagonistic. In fact, officialdom and the people have many references in common, not least a certain conception of the aesthetics and stylistics of power and the way it operates and expands. Hence, for example, the *commandement* must be extravagant, since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele; 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 dress and lifestyle, turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theater.³¹ Similarly, there must be a process of

extraction—through taxes and levies, rents of various sorts, forcible confiscation, and other ways of siphoning off wealth. As 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.”³² The actions that signal sovereignty must be carried through with style and an adequately harsh firmness, otherwise the splendor of those exercising the trappings of authority is dimmed. To exercise authority is, above all, to tire out the bodies of those under it, to disempower them not so much to increase their productivity as to ensure the maximum docility. To exercise authority is, furthermore, for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well, and, again in Labou Tansi’s words, to pass most of his time in “pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls.” The male ruler’s pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallogocentric system.

It seems, then, from these preliminary remarks, that the postcolony is a world of anxious virility, a world hostile to continence, frugality, sobriety. Further, images and idioms are used as much by those designated dominant as by the dominated. Those who laugh, whether 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 its actual origins, they are simply bearing witness, often unconsciously, 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 ideological repertoire of officialdom, along with its idioms and forms; conversely, the official world mimics popular vulgarity, inserting it at the core of the procedures by which it takes on grandeur. It is unnecessary, then, to insist, as does Bakhtin, on oppositions (*dédoublement*)³³ or, as does conventional analysis, on the purported logic of resistance, disengagement, or disjunction.³⁴ Instead, the emphasis should be on the logic of “conviviality,” on the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, inscribing 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 characterize its power, or that it prefers to exercise particularly raw power; peculiar also to the postcolony is the way the relationship between rulers and ruled is forged through a specific practice: simulacrum (*le simulacre*). This explains why dictators can sleep at night lulled by roars of adulation and support only to wake up 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, people whose identities have been partly confiscated have been able, precisely because there was this simulacrum, to glue back together their fragmented identities. By taking over the signs and language of officialdom, they have been able to remythologize their 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 subordination or the level of resistance; it simply produces a situation of disempowerment (*impouvoir*) for both ruled and rulers.³⁵ The process is fundamentally magical; although it may demystify the *commandement*, even erode its supposed legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement's* material base. At best it creates potholes of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe.

As noted, the *commandement* defines itself as a cosmology or, more simply, as a fetish. A fetish is, among other things, an object that 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 that one can call upon, honor, 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 of its agents—the party, policemen, soldiers, administrators and officials, middlemen, and dealers. It turns the postcolonial autocrat into an object that feeds on applause, flattery, lies. By exercising raw power, the fetish, as embodied in the autocrat and the agents of autocracy, takes on an autonomous existence. It becomes unaccountable—or, in the words of Hegel, arbitrary to the extent that it reflects only upon itself.³⁶ In this situation, one should not underestimate the violence that can be set in motion to protect the vocabulary used to denote or speak of the *commandement*, and to safeguard the official fictions that underwrite the apparatus of domination,³⁷ since these are essential to keeping the people under the *commandement's* spell, within an enchanted forest of adulation that, at the same time, makes them laugh.³⁸ While, for the ruled, laughter is a matter of fun and play, from the government's perspective the ultimate objective is to invent and impose a new mindscape, an *imaginaire*

such that what, for the ruled, may seem funny is nonetheless, for the powerful, a sacrilege (as in the case of the Kenyan couple who failed to honor the flag). In this context, laughter or mere indifference is blasphemous, not because so intended but because those in power consider it blasphemous. Categories like blasphemy or sacrilege, however, are inadequate to convey the sense of *eating* (*dévoration*) that is clearly involved—involved because, if we provisionally follow Bakhtin and accept that carnival-like praxis attacks a cosmology and creates a myth centered on the body, we conclude that what we have in the postcolony is a case of “theophagy” where the god is devoured by the worshippers.³⁹

The totem that acts as a double to power is no longer protected by taboo;⁴⁰ there is a breach in the wall of prohibitions. In transgressing taboos and constraints, citizens stress their preference for “conviviality”; they unpack 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 garden-variety arse that defecates like any other. The penis of “His Excellency,” too, turns out to be no more than a peasant’s, unable to resist, amid the aromas of everyday life, the scents of women.

If the people can, even unintentionally, dismember the gods the autocrats aspire to be, and can devour them, the converse is also true, as shown by an account of the public execution of two malefactors in Cameroon:

At dawn on August 28 . . . they were taken to the Carrefour des Billes along the main Douala–Yaoundé road [where] they saw the crowd. Apart from the local population, totaling 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 whiskey 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, Njomezu 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.⁴¹

Here, since the situation is not dissimilar, could be used the narrative structure that Michel Foucault employed in his account of the punishment of Damians.⁴² But the case above occurred in the postcolony. I do not mean that the postcolonial rationale bears no relationship to the colonial rationale;⁴³ 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 with convicts in the Cour de Bicêtre, with the neck bent back over an anvil.⁴⁴ The colony also had its convict labor.⁴⁵ Colonialism, as a relation of power based on violence, intended to cure Africans of their supposed laziness, protecting them from need whether or not they wanted such protection. Given the degeneracy and vice that, from the colonial viewpoint, characterized native life, colonialism found it necessary to rein in the abundant sexuality of the native, to tame his or her spirit, police his/her body—and ensure the increased productivity of his/her labor.⁴⁶

Colonialism was, to a large extent, a way of disciplining bodies with the aim of making better use of them, docility and productivity going 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 excessive, the right to punish in this way was nonetheless generally justified in terms of an overriding concern for profits and productivity.⁴⁷ Yet it would be wrong to reduce the meaning of colonial violence to economics. The whip and the cane also served to force upon the African a concocted identity, an identity that allowed her/him to move in the spaces where she/he was always being ordered around, and where she/he had unconditionally to show submissiveness—in forced labor, public works, local *corvée* labor, military conscription.

In the postcolony, however, the primary objective of the right to punish (as represented by the execution of the condemned) is not to create useful individuals or increase their productive efficiency. This fact is well illustrated by the misadventure of a teacher, Joseph Mwaura, as reported by a Kenyan newspaper. On 21 January 1990, the district commissioner, a Mr. Mwangi, went to Gitothua, an Independent Pentecostal church, to address the trouble-torn congregation. According to Enock Anjili, writing in the *Standard* of 7 April 1990:

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. Mwaura 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.⁴⁸

The story does not end there. In March, the teacher who had had his beard forcibly shaved 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 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 labor (*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.⁴⁹ 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," 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."⁵⁰

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."⁵¹ 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)⁵²—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 last 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 in Douala had been charged with minor crimes. Passing over the instruments of torture and the dramatic cases where the scalpel takes over (as in the crude display of pieces of cut-off flesh, the parade of the handicapped, maimed, and armless, or 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 dramatize its importance and to define itself in the very act of appropriating the lives of two people and ending them. Whereas the two lives, the two deaths, are in principle private, their appropriation by the state is organized as a public performance, to be impressed upon the minds of the citizenry and remembered. Yet the public performance has to appear spontaneous, its setting intimate. A crowd is summoned because, without it, the execution lacks glamor; it is the crowd that gives the event its lavishness.

In this way, a public execution not only reveals the total power of the state but becomes a social transaction. The public face of domination can use 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, followed by the prefect, then 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. 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 makes room for death; hence the wild applause that, like the bullets, stifled the cries of the condemned.⁵³

This fact accounts for the baroque character of the postcolony: its unusual and grotesque art of representation, its taste for the theatrical, and its violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness. Obscenity, in this context, resides in a mode of expression that might seem macabre were it not an integral part of the stylistics of power. The notion of ob-

scenity has no moral connotation here; it harks back 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).⁵⁴

In the rest of this chapter, I shall identify particular sites in which the obscene and the grotesque are laid out in the postcolony. I shall draw most examples from Cameroon, and will privilege discourses and actions in which power, or those that speak for it, put themselves on show.

THE DOMAIN OF DRUNKARDS

On 5 October 1988, Cameroon's head of state, Paul Biya, returned from a trip to the United Nations, where, like most heads of state, he had addressed the General Assembly. His speech had been very short and had offered not one idea or proposition that spoke to the contemporary preoccupations of international opinion. It had been 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*).⁵⁵

This is perhaps why, on Biya's return, the mayor of the capital, Yaoundé, published a "communiqué" calling upon "all the people" of the capital city "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."⁵⁶ To facilitate the "spontaneous" participation of the masses in an "exceptional welcome," shops were to be closed beginning at one P.M. 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."⁵⁷ And they did.

This was not, of course, the first time that the head of state had returned from abroad. Nor was it the first time the mayor had invited the population to "fill the Avenue du 20 mai from the post office roundabout to the Carrefour Warda." This 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.⁵⁸ In this sense, the return of Paul Biya was in no way unusual. The accompanying staging marked simply one instance of the

dramatization of a specific mode of domination that dates back to the 1960s. This mode has had time to routinize itself, to invent its own rules—the aim, on each occasion, being to use an event in itself banal and anodine, in light of how such events are seen by the rest of the world, and turn it into a source of prestige, illusion, magic.

With similar obsessive deference, the official newspaper could describe the presentation of credentials by new ambassadors as follows:

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.⁵⁹

Of the visit of Biya to Belgium in May 1989, the paper wrote:

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.⁶⁰

Should we construe this account as simple verbal extravagance, to be given no more meaning than it merits? This would overlook the fact that in the postcolony the *work* of power also involves a process of “enchantment” to produce “fables.”⁶¹ But there can be no “fable” without its own particular array of clichés and verbal conventions notable for their extravagance and self-regard, intended 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 Henri Bando, the former minister of information and culture, during a ceremony marking the appointment of 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.⁶²

Then, after stressing the need to abandon this “off-beam, uninspired broadcasting in which most programs 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.”⁶³

The concern for rank, the quest for distinction, and the insistence of the Minister on due pomp are expressed through such rhetorical devices as repetition and lists, contrasts between words and things, frequent antitheses, a tendency to exaggerate and indulge systematically in superlatives, a common use of hyperbole and expressions that go beyond reality, and preference for imprecise propositions and vague generalizations, complete with constant references to the future. To be effective, this verbal trance state must reach 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 colonized by the *commandement*.

The production of vulgarity, it should be added, 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” little by little accepted into the domain of the indisputable.⁶⁴ 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 postcolony can be compared to those of communist regimes—to the extent, that is, that both are actual regimes given to the production 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 Ouoko,” *Mithima ma Matiba* (“The Tribulations of Matiba”), *Nituboye Ngai* (“Let us Pray”), “Patriotic Contributions” and *Thina Uria Wakorir Athini a Gicagi nia Muruoto* (“The Troubles of the Poor of Muruoto”).⁶⁵

The postcolony is thus characterized by loss of limits or sense of proportion. This is illustrated by the following account, which shows the government’s disproportionate response to an attempt by members of opposition groups to lay 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 Ahmadou Ahidjo’s regime.

On Friday 18 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 19. 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 International 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.⁶⁶

The significance of sound and hubbub is not limited to speech; it is also manifest in the “liturgies” or ceremonies frequently organized by the state and the party for the masses. But what is depicted here as stereotyped discourse not unlike a *langue de bois*⁶⁷ (or cant) is in fact a way of thinking peculiar to a closed society in which behavior and opinions are always censured, and where constant suspicions about plots or possible revolts predisposes the public to denouncing and exposing anyone suspected. Cant then becomes a local genre, coherent and codified, in which actions and events are strung together in a fantastic—yet, by its own criteria, fully rational—manner to make the implausible plausible.

The dramatization of the postcolonial *commandement* takes place especially during those ceremonies that make up the state’s liturgical calendar. Indeed, after decolonization, Cameroon consciously developed a ceremonial system that, in many respects, recalls some that operated in communist regimes.⁶⁸ The system of festivals institutionalized during the

Ahidjo regime (1958–82) was very like communist ceremonials in how it took on para-religious and dogmatic features, most easily found in the general economy of public life. The ceremonies organized during the last ten years of Ahidjo's reign always produced intense emotional and symbolic expression. They had a repetitive character typical of myth and of cyclical time. In the end, their regularity invested them with the power of custom. "Massive, spontaneous, and enthusiastic" participation was expected of the populace, and the official calendar marked the sequences of social time.⁶⁹ The regime ultimately created its own rhythms of time, work, and leisure, and from them acquired a degree of predictability. For example, it became 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 to compensate for the lack of legitimacy marking the early years of decolonization. In 1958, the French colonial administration had decided its long-term interest dictated that it distance itself from the nationalist movement and ensure instead that its own local clients get the resources of power that would become available at independence.⁷⁰ The resultant attempt to legitimate a political order born amid contempt gave rise to a certain violence to the facts and historical figures of the nationalist period. The state's obsession with remaking the past in its own image remains a most conspicuous characteristic of the regimes that have come to power in Cameroon since the colonial era.

It was during Ahidjo's presidency that the practice began of placing portraits of the head of state in public places. Admittedly, no statues have been erected in Ahidjo's honor, but the largest stadium in the capital and certain 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 that also found expression in the titles 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 discovery of a plot to overthrow the president, 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, this successor regime made every effort to banish him from official memory, in the same way that Ahidjo had organised the relegation of the nationalist resistance leaders to oblivion.⁷¹ Here in the postcolony, it is not just the people who manipulate the past or commit “theophagy.”

Biya’s regime inherited these practices. Under his rule, they were routinized and intensified; new ones were invented. For example, 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 indication that, in a postcolony, power functions in an immense universe where self-adulation goes hand in hand with the claim of possessing the truth; the fetish (here, the effigy of the autocrat) is thus omnipresent, along with the amulets (the identity card, the party card, tax receipts, masses of papers, authorizations, licenses, 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.⁷²

It is not unusual to find the effigy of the head of state in or around people’s houses, a 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. One wears it. It is on people’s bodies, as when women 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.

Not only is Biya’s rise to power celebrated every November 6, but, 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, and lasted for three days, during which people danced to the rhythm of xylophones and drums. Sports compe-

titions were organized and speeches delivered. The event ended with a five-kilometer “long march of support” for the head of state. Local people participated in the celebration, as did religious, political, administrative, and “traditional” authorities. In his speech, Samba Letina, president of the Lom and Djerem section of the party, invited 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.”⁷³

This art of regulating society is now too well known for further comment,⁷⁴ but consider instead, for example, visits by foreign heads of state. In October 1987, when a reception for Abdou Diouf, president of Senegal, was organized, forty-two dance troupes were brought to the airport hours before his arrival. Most of the dancers had, as usual, 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 made of iron, others from gourds with necks slotted together—the latter made a particularly deep, hoarse sound. There were percussion instruments, iron gongs and bells crafted of metal shells, and tubes emitting a metallic sound, to set the rhythm of the dance. Once synchronized, these instruments could bring on possession, “enchant” the dancers, or at least 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.”⁷⁵ 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 from the airport to the visitors’ lodge.⁷⁶ The procedure was repeated when Ibrahim Babangida, the Nigerian head of state, paid an official visit to Yaoundé; ceremonies were even more elaborate for the visits of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir.

In the world of self-adoration that is the postcolony, the troupes summoned to dance 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 laborers that were requisitioned for public works or for portage.⁷⁷ In the postcolony, bodies have been used to entertain the powerful in ceremonies and official parades. On such oc-

casions some of the bodies have borne the marks of famine: flaky scalps, scabies, skin sores. Others have attracted small crowds of flies. But none of this has stopped them from breaking into laughter or peals of joy when the presidential limousines approached. They have stamped the ground with their feet, blanketing the air with dust. Wearing the party uniform, with the image of the head of state printed upon it, women have followed the rhythm of the music and swung their torsos forward and back; elsewhere, they have pulled in and thrust out their bellies, their undulating movement evoking as usual the slow, prolonged penetration of the penis and its staccato retreat.⁷⁸ Yelling and ululating, gesticulating with bodies contorted, everyone would cheer the passing cavalcade of cars, shattering what Rimbaud called “the absurd silence of the stammerer” and content to sustain a link, if only for a second, of familiarity—of collusion, even—with violence and domination in their most heady form.

Power had thus colonized—at least for the moment of official ceremonial—the dances previously linked to particular rituals and specific rules. Amid the cacophony accompanying such a show of strength could be found, scattered here and there, the debris of ritual acts of the past—here, elements from rites enlisting the help of spirits for the hunt; there, bits of funerary or initiation ceremonies, of ceremonies to aid fertility or war. All these elements, juxtaposed, intertwined in a single web, form the postcolonial dramaturgy.

The thirst for prestige, honors, deference—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, the posts and palaces and public places have been filled with 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, 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 to please the despot; it is manufactured for profit or favors. The aim is to share the table of the autocrat, to “eat from his hands.”⁷⁹ Thus, extraordinary deeds are attributed to him;⁸⁰ he is covered in vainglory.⁸¹ Yet 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 secu-

rity apparatus—police harassment, withdrawal of passports, and other forms of intimidation.⁸² Monsters lurk in the shadows of official ceremony. Protected by the grand portrait of the President of the Republic that hangs on every wall, marks the junctions of the main avenues, and graces the jails and the torture chambers, an undisciplined army of dishonest police, informers, identity-card inspectors, gendarmes, men in khaki, and impoverished soldiery coerce the common people blatantly, seizing 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 of maintaining order. It is not simply a matter of whippings and beatings, which, as discussed, are the lot of ordinary people in the prisons, police stations, and other houses of detention.⁸³ There is, rather, 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:

. . . 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 (*misérabilisme*) 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.⁸⁴

What 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!⁸⁵

The link between the *commandement* and its subjects, in postcolonial as in colonial form, meant not only control but also connivance. It rested on the almost invisible assumption that the *commandement* had a right to enjoy everything—which is why, of the elements that make up post-colonization, one 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.⁸⁶

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 hoarded goods and then selling them—all are characteristic of a situation where there is summary violence, looting, and extortion, whether of cash, product, or forced labor. 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 the vendors had no traders' license.

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.⁸⁷

To open a cafeteria, a place to eat in the open, provides an income for the "delabored" (*désœuvrés*, the government's preferred term for the un-

employed, but the administration requires authorization from the mayor of Yaoundé, a medical certificate that needs to be renewed every eight months, and a certificate of hygiene. In the postcolony, such ways of making ends meet (*débrouillardise*) involve many sectors—bakeries, hotels, garages, and so on—and none is safe from police harassment. Thus, during the same August, the deputy prefectorial assistant of Mbouda called in the bakers and the hotel proprietors of the city:

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.⁸⁸

There is one last practice to consider. I suggested earlier that the mouth, the belly, and the penis constitute the classic ingredients of *commandement* in the postcolony, but did not fully examine the process by which pleasure is transformed into a site of death. I shall here only suggest that, in this context, the act of exercising command cannot be separated from the production of licentiousness. For example, having come to install the headmaster of the high school, as well as the director of the training college for assistant instructors, at Abong-Mbang in January 1988, the prefect of Haut Nyong, Ename Ename Samson, urged that teachers “have only pedagogic and healthy, not intimate and culpable, relationships with their students.”⁸⁹ The prefect was aware of the excessive “rights,” arrogated to themselves by bureaucrats to take women. In similar regard, Labou Tansi has written, as we have seen, in *La vie et demie* of soldiers who spend their time “pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls”—“Soldiers of the phallus and the nightclub,” that novelist calls them. One can, like the novelist, add 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.” This is not to mention the real “kings of the bush”—the prefects and sub-prefects, police officers and gendarmes—who have practically unlimited rights over those in their charge (*droits de cuissage*).

These “rights” exempt acts of copulation from inclusion in the category of what is “shameful.” It would be pointless to contrast the post-colonial bureaucrat’s desire for sexual pleasure with normal erotic activity. In the postcolony, diverse forms of *cuissage* and related “rights,”

the concern to reproduce, and the life of the flesh complement one another, even if the ecstasy of the organs, the excesses of fine food and drink, characteristic of an economy of pleasure may be seen as an integral part of a larger world, that of de Sade. There is, for example, the story reported in the *Cameroon Tribune* of Jean-Marie Effa, a master in the primary school at Biyem-Assi, convicted of having regularly had intercourse with young girls in his class:

The incident took place in the second term of the school year 1989/90. [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, bureaucrats' harassment of students at school exits, honking 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 through allusions to the sexual organs of office secretaries and the prowess of declared favorites 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. Perhaps this is why a character in one of Labou Tansi's novels utters, "It makes a soft sound, a virgin on the other end, that delicious moan."⁹⁰

The world of de Sade is, then, seen in the word-play and sexual practices indulged in by the agents of the *commandement*. I should add that lusty sovereigns of the postcolony have peopled their countries with an unknown number of children.⁹¹ Such practices no longer refer to customs that, 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 colonial settlers and their successors greatly profited). There is 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 question, then, is how, in the postcolony, these baroque practices have become an integral part of the bureaucrat's lifestyle, how the economy of pleasure has become inseparable from vice.

THE INTIMACY OF TYRANNY⁹²

Although the effectiveness of what Foucault calls the “politics of coercion” should not be underestimated, it is important not to lose sight of how 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, the inherent cautiousness—the analyst must watch for the myriad ways ordinary people guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly.

These evasions, as endless as Sisyphus’s, can be explained only in that individuals are constantly being trapped in a net of rituals that reaffirm tyranny, and in that these rituals, however minor, are intimate in nature. Recent Africanist scholarship has not studied in detail the logic of capture and narrow escape, nor the way the traps are so interconnected that they become a unitary system of ensnarement. Yet making sense of this network is necessary for any knowledge we might have of the logics of “resistance,” “disorder,”⁹³ and “conviviality” 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 surveillance, or the politics of coercion. The practices of ordinary citizens 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, this is because the subjects of the *commandement* have internalized authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life—social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, styles of dress, rhetorical devices, and the whole political economy of the body. The subjection is also more intense because, were they to detach themselves from these ludic resources, the subjects would, *as subjects*, lose the possibility of multiplying their identities.

Yet it is precisely this possibility of assuming multiple identities that accounts for the fact that the body that dances, dresses in the party uniform, fills the roads, “assembles *en masse*” to applaud the passing presidential procession in a ritual of confirmation, is willing to dramatize its

subordination through such small tokens of fealty, and at the same time, instead of keeping silent in the face of obvious official lies and the efrontery of elites, this body breaks into laughter. And, by laughing, it drains officialdom of meaning and sometimes obliges it to function while empty and powerless. Thus we may assert that, by dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the “postcolonized 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, the subject is reaffirming that this power is incontestable—*precisely the better to play with it and modify it whenever possible.*

In short, the public affirmation of the “postcolonized subject” is not necessarily found in acts of “opposition” or “resistance” to the *commandement*. What defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written, and precise rules. These simultaneous 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 pretense (*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 not only relations of conviviality and covering over, but also of powerlessness par excellence—from the viewpoint both of the masters of power and of those they crush. However, since these processes are essentially magical, they in no way erase the dominated from the epistemological field of power.⁹⁴

Consider, for example, ceremonies for the “transfer of office” that 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. Essomba Ntonga Godfroy, the “newly elected” municipal administrator, was to be “installed in his post,” with his two assistants, Andre Effa Owona and Jean-Paul Otu. The ceremony was presided over by the prefect of Mefou, Tabou Pierre, assisted by the sub-prefect of Mbankomo District, Bekonde Belinga Henoc-Pierre. Among the main personalities on the stand were the president of the party’s departmen-

tal section, representatives of elites from inside and outside the district, “traditional” authorities, and cult priests. The dancers were accompanied by drums and xylophones. A church choir also contributed. 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.⁹⁵

He did not forget to rattle off the list of positions held by the recently promoted official, and not only mentioned his age but also reminded the audience of his sporting successes.⁹⁶ But it was at the installation of 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 Brévannes before returning to his native country in January 1960.⁹⁷

Such attention to detail should not come as a surprise; it is part of the system of “distinction.”⁹⁸ The enumeration of the slightest educational achievement is one of the postcolonial codes of prestige, with special attention to distinctions attained in Europe. Thus, for example, citizens cite their diplomas with great care, they show off their titles—doctor, chief, president, and so on—with great affectation, as a way of claiming honor, glory, attention. Displays of this kind have an effect beyond their contribution to state ritual. Such a display is transformative; by casting its rays on the person installed, it bestows upon him a new radiance. In the hierarchy of mock honors, the description of scholarly achievements constitutes a marker of rank and status as well as of qualification.⁹⁹

Another example of “distinction” 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, obtained from the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, cost CFA 11,500 each for the gold, CFA 10,500 for the dark red, and CFA 8,500 for the silver varieties. Additionally, businesses gave “contributions” to the recipients to help with family festivities.¹⁰⁰ These family celebrations included “libations, feasting and various extravagances [which] are the norm in such circumstances.”¹⁰¹ One could indeed be disturbed by the lavishness of the expenditure, since it is rare to find a recipient of a medal who is not heavily in debt after the celebrations, but the primary point is 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 for political compliance.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

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.¹⁰⁴

In the postcolony, magnificence and the desire to shine are not the prerogative only of those who command. The people also want to be “honored,” 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.¹⁰⁵

It is clear that the obscenity of power in the postcolony is also fed by a desire for majesty on the part of the people. Because the postcolony is characterized above all by scarcity, the metaphor of food “lends itself to the wide-angle lens of both imagery and efficacy.”¹⁰⁶ Food and tips (*pourboire*) are political,¹⁰⁷ “food,” like “scarcity,” cannot be dissociated from particular regimes of “death,” from specific modalities of enjoyment or from therapeutic quests.¹⁰⁸ This is why “the night”¹⁰⁹ and “witchcraft,”¹¹⁰ the “invisible,”¹¹¹ the “belly,” the “mouth,”¹¹² and the “pe-

nis” are historical phenomena in their own right. They are institutions and sites of power, in the same way as pleasure or fashion:

Cameroonians love slick gaberdine suits, Christian Dior outfits, Yamamoto blouses, shoes of crocodile skin¹¹³

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.¹¹⁴

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.¹¹⁵

Even death does not escape this desire to “shine” and to be “honored.” The rulers and the ruled want more than ceremonies and celebrations to show off their splendor. Those who have accumulated goods, prestige, and influence are not only tied to the “constraints of giving.”¹¹⁶ They are also taken by the desire to “die well” and to be buried with pomp.¹¹⁷ Funerals constitute one of the occasions where those who command gaze at themselves, much like Narcissus.¹¹⁸ 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 what was then the Northwestern Province, Wabon Ntuba Mboe, himself accompanied by the Grand Chancellor, the first vice-president of the party, and 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, Joseph Charles Dumba, Minister to the Presidency. The Economic and Social Council was represented by its president, Ayang Luc, the National Assembly by the president of the parliamentary group, and the Central Committee of the Party by its treasurer.¹¹⁹ Power’s sanction thus penetrated to the very manner the dead man was buried. It appears that those who command seek to familiarize themselves with death, paving the way for their burial to take on a certain quality of pleasure and expenditure.

During the funeral of Thomas Ebongalame, 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 parastatals, and “initiated member of the secret society of his tribe,” the procession left Yaoundé by road. Huge crowds had come from throughout Southwestern Province to pay their last respects.

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.¹²⁰

As we have seen, obscenity—regarded as more than a moral category—constitutes one modality 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 this group. 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 to reproduce its epistemology, and when 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 Africa must be studied. Such research must go beyond institutions, beyond formal positions of power, and beyond the written rules, and examine how the implicit and explicit are interwoven, and how the practices of those who command and those who are assumed to obey are so entangled as to render both powerless. For it is precisely the situations of powerlessness that are the situations of violence par excellence.

NOTES

1. I have in mind his understanding of the way “non-official” cultures invert and desecrate “official” values in carnivalesque activities. Cf. M. Bakhtin, *L’oeuvre de Rabelais et la culture populaire du Moyen-Age et sous la Renaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); for a recent critique, R. Lachmann, “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture,” *Culture Critique* (1987–89), 115–52.

2. This is well attested in the contemporary African novel, for instance, S. Labou Tansi’s *La vie et demie* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 41. Other examples of this

insight into the postcolony are found in Tansi's *Les yeux du volcan* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) and A. Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1998).

3. See A. Mbembe, "Pouvoir, violence et accumulation," *Politique africaine* 39 (1990): 7–24; *Politique africaine* 2, 7 (1982), "The Power to Kill," special issue, and 42 (June 1991) "Violence and Power," special issue; C. Geffray, *La cause des armes au Mozambique: anthropologie d'une guerre civile* (Paris: Karthala, 1990).

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

5. I use the notion of *cible* in the sense indicated by M. Foucault, "La gouvernementalité," *Magazine Littéraire* 269 (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*.]

6. On these complex questions cf. J.-F. Bayart, "L'énonciation du politique," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 35 (1985): 343–73.

7. The poverty of the hypotheses that guide a number of studies is telling in this regard, in that 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, or 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 V. Azarya, and N. Chazan, "Disengagement from the State in Africa: Reflections on the Experience of Ghana and Guinea" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, 1 (1987): 106–31, and D. Rothchild and N. Chazan, eds., *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987). Some of the limitations of these works are made evident by J. L. Roitman in "The Politics of Informal Markets in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 28, 4:671 ff. See also J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), and P. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

8. I use the term *commandement* as 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 (without, of course, discussing) them. Hence the notion of *commandement* is used here for the authoritarian modality par excellence. On the colonial theorization of this mode see, for example, R. Delavignette, *Freedom and Authority in French West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, for the International African Institute, 1950). See, more generally, W. B. Cohen, *Rulers of Empire* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1971).

9. On the notion of the "fetish" as applied in the African context, cf. *Nou-*

velle *Revue de Psychanalyse* 2, 1970; particularly the contributions by J. Pouillon, A. Adler, and P. Bonnafé, 131–4.

10. See T. M. Callaghy, “Culture and Politics in Zaire,” unpublished ms., 1986; and see the examples in M. G. Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

11. The point is demonstrated in the study of the carnival in England during the Renaissance by M. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985). For other commentaries see A. Falassi, ed., *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987); D. A. Poole, “Accommodation and Resistance in Andean Ritual Dance,” *Drama Review* 34, 2 (1990):98.

12. See G. Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

13. This is amply demonstrated in the work of S. Berry. See her *No Condition Is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

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

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

16. The subtitle derives partly from D. Parkin, “The Creativity of Abuse,” *Man* (new ser.) 15 (1980):45. Parkin uses the term in the context of ritualized verbal exchanges whereas I am taking it to interpret more strictly defined political situations. Cf. C. Toulabor, “Jeu de mots, jeux de vilain: Lexique de la dérision politique au Togo,” *Politique africaine* 3 (1981):55–71, and *Le Togo sous Eyadéma* (Paris: Karthala, 1986), especially 302–09.

17. See, again, Toulabor, “Jeu de mots, jeux de vilain” and *Le Togo sous Eyadéma*, 302–09.

18. *Cameroon Tribune* 4778, 4 December 1990, 11.

19. See, in this respect, Schatzberg’s analysis of the state as “eye” and “ear” in his *Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

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

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

22. [The sense of dismemberment is the essence of this verb.—*Translator*.]

23. See Tansi, *La vie et demie*, 42, 55–56, 68.

24. On the anthropological significance of “the belly” in southern Cameroon see L. M. Guimera, *Ni dos ni ventre* (Paris: Société d’Ethnologie, 1981). For a political interpretation of the same metaphor, see J.-F. Bayart, *L’État en Afrique: La politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

25. This is starkly evident in the colonial African novel, e.g. the classic by F. Oyono, *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (Paris: Juillard, 1957).

26. 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, *The Dialectics of Oppression*, and “Power, Language and Legitimacy in Africa,” paper presented at the conference on “Identity, Rationality and the Post-colonial Subject: African Perspectives on Contemporary Social Theory,” Columbia University, New York, 28 February 1991.

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

28. I am extrapolating for my own purposes from an argument developed in another context by E. Tonkin in “Masks and Powers,” *Man* (new. ser.) 14 (1979): 237–48.

29. “Police Beat Up Man over Flag,” *The Standard* 23547, 8 February 1990, 1–2.

30. On this intimacy and domesticity—the way 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, colonizes all the ways of everyday life—see J. M. Ela, *Quand l’état pénètre en brousse* (Paris: Karthala, 1990), 52–58.

31. Compare this conspicuous consumption with the ethos of prestige and the system of expenditure in the courtly society of Europe as revealed by N. Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 42–65, and chapter 4 on the etiquette and logic of prestige.

32. In Tansi, *La vie et demie*, 122.

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

34. As does, for example, Scott. See his “Prestige as the Public Discourse of Domination,” *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989):145 ff.

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

36. Cf. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

37. 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.

38. Cf. what Bakhtin calls the “official monologism,” the naive pretension to possess a “whole truth,” in *La Poétique de Dostoïevski*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

39. 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, undertaken according to a specific ritual. For details, see J. Kott, *The Eating of the Gods: An Interpretation of Greek Tragedy*, trans. B. Taborski and E. Czer-

winski (New York: Random House, 1970); see also G. Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962).

40. See S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1983).

41. This account is from the *Gazette* (Douala) 589, September 1987.

42. M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). [Published in English as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979], especially 9–11. The spectacle of Damiens's end provoked vivid eyewitness 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.

43. Compare A. Mbembe, *Afriques indociles* (Paris: Karthala, 1988).

44. 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 rumors that white bachelors courted young women, not for sexual relations but "to make them live with their dogs." "For not wanting to comply, I was whipped, lying naked 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." J. Jewsiewicki, "Questions d'histoire intellectuelle de l'Afrique: La construction du soi dans l'autre au Zaire," unpublished ms., 1990.

45. See H. R. Mango Mado, *Complaintes d'un forçat* (Yaoundé: Cle, 1969).

46. See R. L. Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1928).

47. As in C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des compagnies concessionnaires* (Paris: Mouton, 1972).

48. In E. Anjili, "You Must also Shave Your Goatee. TSC Orders Bearded Teacher to Drop Case," *Standard* 23597, 7 April 1990.

49. See, for instance, A. Marenya, "Kenyans mark Moi day with pomp," *The Standard* 23757, 11 October 1990.

50. Tansi, *La vie et demie*, 114–15.

51. *Ibid.*

52. 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."

53. See J. Miller, "Carnivals of Atrocity: Foucault, Nietzsche, Cruelty," *Political Theory* 18, 3 (1990):470–91.

54. I am borrowing an insight from Bataille's *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*.

55. *Cameroon Tribune* 4235, 5 October 1988.

56. *Ibid.*, 3.

57. *Ibid.*

58. For historical and sociological perspectives on the successive political regimes of Cameroon see R. Joseph, *Le mouvement nationaliste au Cameroun: Les origines sociales de l'UPC* (Paris: Karthala, 1986); J.-F. Bayart, *L'État au*

Cameroun (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977); P. F. Ngayap, *Cameroun: Qui gouverne?* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1984); L. Sindjoun, ed., *La révolution passive au Cameroun* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1999).

59. Cf. "Deux nouveaux ambassadeurs accrédités au Cameroun: Egards mérités," *Cameroon Tribune* 4252, 28 October 1988.

60. *Cameroon Tribune* 4384, 9 May 1989, 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 A. Mama, "Un pays qui compte," *Cameroon Tribune* 4391, 18 May 1989, 3.

61. This dimension of power is well interpreted in the postcolonial African novel. See also D. Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1989), 58–64, 143–71. For other cases, see Schatzberg, *Dialectics of Oppression*, and T. M. Callaghy, "Culture and Politics in Zaire," unpublished ms., 1986.

62. H. Bandolo, "Radio-télé: Les nouveaux défis," *Cameroon Tribune* 4264, 15 November 1988, 2. For another example of such verbiage with a pseudo-academic allure, see J. F. Ndongo, "La marche collective: Une technique efficace de communication-spectacle," *Cameroon Tribune*, 3 April 1990, 3.

63. We must denounce them, he emphasized, "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.

64. See S. Wilentz, *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual and Politics since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 4.

65. See M. Mwai, "Police Raid Shops for Subversive Music," *Daily Nation* 9193, 2 July 1990, 1–2; see also V. Mwangi, "Music Cassettes: Nineteen on Sedition Charge," *Daily Nation* 9197, 6 July 1990, 1–2.

66. In J. S. Amassana, "Chasse à l'homme à Bafoussam à l'occasion de la pose d'une gerbe de fleurs en mémoire de l'exécution d'Ernest Ouandié," *Combatant* 465, 24 January 1991, 11.

67. For an analysis of these types of verbal performance, see F. Thom, *La langue de bois* (Paris: Julliard, 1987).

68. See C. A. P. Binns, "The Changing Face of Power: Revolution and Accommodation in the Development of the Soviet Ceremonial System" I, *Man*, new ser., 14 (1979):585–606, and "The Changing Face of Power" II, *Man*, new ser., 15 (1980):170–87; J. McDowell, "Soviet Civil Ceremonies," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13, 3 (1974): 265–79; and especially C. Lane, *The Rites of Rulers. Ritual in Industrial Society: The Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

69. See E. Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols Are Connected*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); S. Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration," *Sociology* 9 (1975): 298–308; T. O. Cushman, "Ritual and Conformity in Soviet Society," *Journal of Communist Studies* 4, 2 (1988):162–80; C. A. P. Binns, "Ritual and Conformity in Soviet Society: A Comment," *Journal of Communist Studies* 5, 2 (1989):211–19.

70. See A. Mbembe, "L'état-historien," in R. Um Nyobe, ed., *Ecrits sous maquis* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1989), 10–42, and "Pouvoir des morts et langages

des vivants: Les errances de la mémoire nationaliste au Cameroun,” *Politique africaine* 22 (1986).

71. As noted in A. Mbembe, “Le spectre et l’état: Des dimensions politiques de l’imaginaire historique dans le Cameroun postcolonial,” *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale* 44 (1989): 2–13.

72. In N. Henry, “Africa’s ‘Big Men’ Outliving Welcome,” *Washington Post* 278, 9 September 1991, 1.

73. See D. Ibrahim, “Bertoua: Réjouissances et méditation,” *Cameroon Tribune* 4372, 19 April 1989, 11.

74. For an analysis of such ceremonies, see Y. A. Fauré, “Célébrations officielles et pouvoirs africains: Symboliques et construction de l’état,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 12 (1978): 383–404; C. Lane, *The Rites of Rulers. Ritual in Industrial Society: The Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

75. *Cameroon Tribune* 3981, 2 October 1987.

76. M. Bakoa, “Une fête africaine pour Diouf,” *Cameroon Tribune* 3981, 2 October 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).

77. See H. R. Rudin, *The Germans in Cameroon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938).

78. A description of the customary dances of the Beti of southern Cameroon may be found in P. Laburthe-Tolra, *Les seigneurs de la forêt* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1981), 310 ff.

79. The point is well noted by A. Kom in “Writing under a Monocracy: Intellectual Poverty in Cameroon” (trans. R. H. Mitsch), *Research in African Literature* 22, 1 (1991):83–92.

80. Examples of such practices during the regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo range from J. B. Alima, *Les chemins de l’unité. Comment se forge une nation: L’exemple camerounais* (Paris: ABC, 1977) and J. C. Doumba, *Vers le Mont Cameroun: Entretiens avec Jean-Pierre Fogui* (Paris: ABC, 1982), to S.M. Eno-Belinga, *Cameroun: La révolution pacifique du 20 mai*, (Yaoundé: Lamaro, 1976).

81. For the regime of Paul Biya, see, for example, E. E. Etian, *Allah Ouakbar, ou la main de Dieu* (Yaoundé: ESSTI, 1988).

82. This, for example, is the solution proposed by H.M. Ndjana, in *L’idée sociale chez Paul Biya* (Yaoundé: Université de Yaoundé, 1985).

83. See Bayart, *L’état au Cameroun*.

84. In J. B. Sipa, “Lettre ouverte au Préfet du Wouri,” *Messenger* 193, 31 July 1990, 2.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. Cf. *Cameroon Tribune* 3981, 2 October 1987. For Senegal, see R. Collignon, “La lutte des pouvoirs publics contre les ‘encombrements humains’ à Dakar,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 18, 3 (1984):573–78.

88. In the *Cameroon Tribune* 3981, 2 October 1987.

89. In J. Okala, “Des responsables installés à Abong-Mbang,” *Cameroon Tribune* 4305, 13 January 1988.

90. A situation reminiscent of the French monarchy under the ancien régime;

see M. Antoine, *Le dur métier du roi: Etudes sur la civilisation politique de la France d'ancien régime* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), 293–313.

91. See S. Labou Tansi, *L'anté-peuple* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

92. Here I adapt the title of the French translation of R. Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977). *Les tyrannies de l'intimité*. (In the original, "The tyrannies of intimacy" is the title of the conclusion.)

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

94. Cf. the metaphor of cat and mouse used in E. Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. C. Stewart (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1988), 281–82.

95. From P. Essono, "Installation de l'administrateur municipal de Mban-komo: Le fête de la démocratie retrouvée," *Cameroon Tribune* 4207, 4 December 1987, 11.

96. We are told, *inter alia*, that he was a former champion and holder of the 400 meter record (50.1 seconds) in Cameroon, winning a gold medal at the francophone school and in a university competition in May 1957. M. Bissi, "Communauté urbaine de Douala: Place à M. Pokossy Ndoumbé," *Cameroon Tribune* 4372, 19 April 1989, 3.

97. In Bissi, "Communauté urbaine," *Cameroon Tribune* 4372, 19 April 1989, 3.

98. See P. Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979), especially the section on struggles over symbols.

99. On the regulation of rites and of private conduct, as well as the notion of a "code of circulation/distinction," cf. E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 17–76.

100. See R. Owona, "Un prix fort," *Cameroon Tribune* 4391, 18 May 1989.

101. In N. Ntete, "Un privilège qu'il faut mériter," *Cameroon Tribune* 4391, 18 May 1989, 15.

102. Leach has already shown how the rules of a system can be manipulated in order to maximize prestige and social status. E. Leach, *Political Systems in Highland Burma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 155–56, 183–90.

103. See M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. I. Cunnison (London: Routledge, 1969).

104. *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 E. Hatch, "Theories of Social Honor," *American Anthropologist* 91 (1989): 341–53—although Hatch confines himself to a dichotomy between materialist and non-materialist approaches.

105. In J. B. Simgba, "La communauté musulmane du Cameroun en fête," *Cameroon Tribune* 4383, 7–8 May 1989, 7.

106. See J. L. Guyer, "British Colonial and Postcolonial Food Regulation, with Reference to Nigeria: An Essay in Formal Sector Anthropology," unpublished ms. [1991].

107. Understood here in the sense intended by Bayart, who draws on the Foucaultian notion of *gouvernementalité* to define the *gouvernementalité du ventre* (belly politics) of black Africa. J.-F. Bayart, *L'état en Afrique*.

108. M. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study of Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
109. E. de Rosny, *Les yeux de ma chèvre* (Paris: Plon, 1977).
110. P. Geschiere, "Sorcery and the State: Popular Modes of Political Action among the Maka of Southeast Cameroon," *Critique of Anthropology* 8 (1988).
111. P. Bonnafé, *Nzo Lipfu, le lignage de la mort: La sorcellerie, idéologie de la lutte sociale sur le plateau kukuya* (Paris: Labethno, 1978).
112. E. P. Brown, *Nourrir les gens, nourrir les haines*. (Paris: Société d'ethnographie, 1983).
113. R. Owona, "Branché sur les cinq continents," *Cameroon Tribune* 4378, 27 April 1989.
114. D. N. Tagne, "Le venin hypnotique de la griffe," *Cameroon Tribune* 4378, 27 April 1989.
115. C. M. Zok, "Le prêt-à-porter fait du porte-à-porte," *Cameroon Tribune* 4378, 27 April 1989.
116. See P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque: sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), 230.
117. See the comments of J. Omoruyi, "Nigerian Funeral Programmes: An Unexplored Source of Information," *Africa* 58, 4 (1988):466-69.
118. 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 C. Vidal, "Funérailles et conflit social en Côte d'Ivoire," *Politique Africaine* 24 (1987), and M. Gilbert, "The Sudden Death of a Millionaire: Conversion and Consensus in a Ghanaian Kingdom," *Africa* 58, 3 (1988):291-313.
119. N. Mbonwoh, "Le corps de Joseph Awunti repose désormais à Kedju Ketinguh," *Cameroon Tribune* 4010, 12 November 1987, 3.
120. M. Bakoa, "Heures de tristesse dans le sud-ouest," *Cameroon Tribune* 4389, 14 and 15 May 1989, 3.