AFRICA AND THE NIGHT OF LANGUAGE

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Achille Mbembe
(University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)

By

Annalisa Oboe
(University of Padua, Italy)

This interview with Achille Mbembe started in Venice in March 2008 and continued for some time in the form of a conversation about the personal and intellectual routes that have led him to become one of the most original voices in contemporary culture and thought. Mbembe is perhaps best known internationally for his On the Postcolony. *Originally written in French, this book has been translated into Italian and English. Other translation projects in German and Spanish are under way.* On the Postcolony *has become a landmark in the field of African studies, together with a number of related articles and interviews published in prestigious journals. Mbembe's work is a sustained and at times critical dialogue with the French philosophical tradition, with the postcolonial theory of Anglo-Saxon origin, and with black diaspora thought in the United States. It also creatively engages with literature, music and contemporary art.*

Annalisa Oboe: You were born and grew up in Cameroon, spent time in Paris as a student, then left France for the USA as a young scholar. Later you went back to Africa to work, first in Dakar and then in Johannesburg, while still spending part of the year in America. What is the relationship between your personal intellectual history and the complex geographical coordinates that subtend your training?

Achille Mbembe: I was born in Cameroon where I spent my childhood. I grew up in a community where each home was by definition a home for others. By the time I arrived in Paris in my early twenties, I was very much a self-confident and optimistic character, having undergone nothing I could describe as an upheaval. I got a PhD in history at the Université de Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne and a DEA in politics at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris. I then left for the United States where I taught for a number of years at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania, and spent a year at The Brookings Institute before returning to Africa - first to Dakar, Senegal, and then on to South Africa where I now live and work while continuing to teach in America at Duke University once a year.

Many African scholars and intellectuals dream about the Old World. As I just told you, I made the exact opposite choice. I arrived in South Africa after having travelled the distance of the Atlantic Triangle - from my country of birth to France, from France to America, and from America back to Africa. South Africa is now my center of gravity, my watchtower onto the global world, the primary location of my political and intellectual reflection. I cannot tell you how long this will last.

Of my country of birth, I should say that I have not been living there for more than a quarter of a century. But I still remember its name and care about its fate. In fact, not so long ago, one could still find its arts of cursing in the underneath of whatever I wrote. I should nevertheless confess that of late, I have only been able to speak about it by stammering – in the manner of forced speech. Because of the emotive distance that now separates me from my birth place, I no longer find its name and address easy to grasp. I find it harder and harder to come to grips with the place where I was born.

Not so long ago, one could still find my country of birth's arts of cursing in the underneath of whatever I wrote. Of late, I have only been able to speak about it by stammering...

But although I have kept moving along the Atlantic triangle and although I inhabit the rifts of each side of the triangle, I do not belong to any of these sides in the strict sense of the term. I am a native of neither South Africa, France or the United States. I am a citizen of nowhere in particular. But nor do I define my condition as that of an exiled or of a nomad. Belonging to nowhere in particular, I have become my own home, a portable house I take with me wherever I happen to find a roof. I have to find a center that is not tangible, some form of interiority that gives me a sense of inner stability amidst the turbulence and vagaries of where life takes me. This state of permanent motion and fugitiveness has become an important dimension of the way I think.

Oboe: What are the most important moments in your intellectual growth, the encounters that were

Ash and Lightning above an Icelandic Volcano
Photo: NASA (public domain)

crucial to your intellectual exploration and thinking?

Mbembe: The Bible and to a certain extent Christianity have exercised the single most crucial influences on my intellectual itinerary. In any case they are the structuring mental landscapes against which the formative years of my life as a scholar unfolded. By Christianity, I do not mean the Catholic Church, its dogmas, its moral formalism and the ideological functions it has played throughout history – especially in the colonial world.

In a heartless world, religious misery as denounced by Marx is a fact. But for me not only is religion ineradicable, the Church and the Bible are not the same. And a world without religion or music would be simply dreary, un-poetic and unimaginative. In my mind, Christianity is first and foremost a master-image and it is as such that I owe it a profound debt. It is an inward sound, a certain aesthetics and a politics. For me, the oneiric power of Christianity derives from the enchanting idea that closure can be overcome; that the question of our genealogy can never be settled once for all and therefore the notion that our biography can be written is somewhat ludicrous.

In the New Testament I encountered an amazing and colorful human world of sensations – hunger, thirst, funerals, misery and joy, wine changed into water, all the spirituous matter from which the seeds arise.

I started reading the New Testament when I was a young boy. In the New Testament, I encountered an amazing and colorful human world of sensations – hunger, thirst, funerals, misery and joy, wine changed into water, festivals and loafs of bread, the sick being healed, singing, titillation, all the spirituous matter from which the seeds arise. But the arresting scenes that truly grabbed my imagination were always those of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. That early on in my life I learnt to take seriously what we can call the "the gift of life" – in this case the event of the 'Son of Man' absorbing the world and being absorbed by the world at the moment of his death, at the border of his life – this is a direct result of my encounter with Christianity. I think most of my critique and writing of Africa has been up to now an endless commentary on the drama of crucifixion and the hope for resurrection; on what it means *to perish* - the encounter with an irrecusable boundary that tells us about the essential connection between death, life and freedom; about how to shape the world within the self in order to re-emerge on the other side of life.

So part of what I took from Christianity is that in order to come to terms with the reality of the Cross in our history and confront head on the other face of the shadow, the nearness, the immediacy, the here-and-now of the shadow in which our being is immersed, we have to try as much as possible to shape the world within our inner self. Radical politics, in this sense, is inseparable from spirituality and aesthetics – the need to transform oneself, to push oneself into the upper circles of creation, to break free from that which is frozen. We have to do this with our eyes always open to what lies ahead, what is yet to come, that which is coming far ahead, if not life will remain only a terrifying statue, an empty ornament, the sign of nothing substantial – inexpressive and unmelodic, pointless calculations and pure thingness. Therefore the task of critique is to witness. And to witness is to overcome a static picture of the world so as to be able to feel the pulse of life, to penetrate to the core of life – that which is always ahead of us.

To a certain extent, the originary spirit of my model of reading is to be found in the story of the 'Son of Man' who, having assumed a human shape, sheds through death the thingness in which he had been enclosed, allowing therefore a previously unsuspected reality to rush in, a previously unsuspected Event to happen. That is what made me dream as a young boy. The concern with the last days, with the End – eschatology – and the final Judgment did not move me at all. I was not pious. Maybe that is why I always try to write in a way that makes feelings sonorous, with hard rhythms and at times somber profundity many have mistaken for pessimism.

This is also what explains that at the core of my work, there is a certain kind of restlessness, a certain sense of immediacy, urgency and a quest for a certain

quality of interiority without which politics is nothing but repetition without difference. I now believe that at the source of this restlessness is something I took from Christianity – the urge to distrust the sterile power of the merely existent, of that which can easily be crushed. Let's call it an ethics of presence and detachment, an availability to the Essential.

This having been said – and to remain within the strictures of the theological language I have been using – I still have to properly interrogate the possibility of resurrection as such, of a remainder to come, of another form of life to be. I long hoped that the South African experiment would help me move my work in that direction, along the lines of a meditation on the conditions of re-emergence from the shadows, from ellipsis – a politics of possibility.

Oboe: Given these theoretical premises, how do you explain the fact that your published work has often been accused of pessimism (or Afro-pessimism), with particular reference to *On the Postcolony*?

Mbembe: Only those who have read my work carelessly or without a philosophical – or even theological – disposition can characterize it as "pessimistic". I come from a tradition in which "to think" (*penser*) is the same as "to weigh" (*peser*) and "to expose". To think critically is to work with the faultlines, to get in touch with the chaotic touch of our world, to bring it to language, to write its singular plurality. In any case, the relationship between critique and pessimism is very complex and critical pessimism is not capitulation. It is endless vigilance. In order to reimagine the political and ethical realms, we need to think together devastation and transformation, darkening and awakening, the night coming from below and the light that undoes the world of the shadows – dialectically, in a double movement. I do not pretend to substitute or to speak for anyone except myself. I believe that what matters is to think ethically, sincerely and responsibly. As far as Africa is concerned, a measure of our sincerity is for instance whether we succeed to write about human experience in this region of the world without trivializing it or provoking misplaced empathy or contempt.

Take for instance Frantz Fanon who is very much a primary interlocutor in *On the Postcolony*. His pedagogy is to first dwell in the dark night of negation, facelessness and objecthood in order precisely to better break through into the chaos of light. For me, we recognize the moment of pessimism when the layers of the past and the world of the present fall into the void, that is, a place that is not a place. We recognize the moment of pessimism when we are facing a structural inability to release language, to experience freedom and eroticism. I have tried to write as a man who knows how to enjoy life and who takes it for what it is, with fervor, joviality and even jubilation, but also with grief. I have also tried to not shy away from its shallowness, and at times its lack of a kernel – the elemental materiality of the *there is*.

We have to get out of the petrified systems and languages in which certain traditions of social science inquiry have imprisoned Africa.

Let me finally add that there are themes that cannot be evaded if we want to confront what it means to write Africa after colonialism. We might be unchained. But we are still not free. We are still not the self-made self decolonization was supposed to gesture to. We are confronted in the present with situations where to be alive simply means a blind will to survive; and the cost of blind survival is to kill anybody, to kill one's own. If we want to reflect critically on the borders of life and the drama of being, on what it means to be alive today, then we have to get out of the petrified systems and languages in which certain traditions of social science have imprisoned African experience.

I would be a pessimist, even a nihilist if – following with what I just told you about the confrontation with the Cross of our history – I was a proponent of a kind of sacrificial-death theology or if my voice spoke in the tone of self-righteous hatred – someone who is bitter, resentful and consumed by the will for revenge.

There is a huge amount of bad faith going on when we convince ourselves of our powerlessness in order to hide the truth that we are in fact looking for an excuse to accommodate the mess of our world, some of which is of our own making. That's not the spirit that underlies my work. It is, rather, the firm hope that one day, we will be able to destroy the powers which hold a negative sway on our life.

But I don't believe that these powers will be destroyed in some kind of big bang, once for all. They will be destroyed through a work of incessant creation, through a long series of dots it is our task to put together. This will necessarily be the case because human creation is, by definition, perishable. There won't be a New Heaven and a New Earth one morning. To believe that this will ever be the case is to buy into mysticism. In the meantime, to write is to perform disruption.

Oboe: How would you define your encounters with

Eruption at Fimmvörðuháls at dusk
Photo: Henrik Thorburn (Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license)

French and American culture and intellectual traditions? What did they contribute to your work?

Mbembe: I received a fairly classical education, in the humanities. I studied Latin for instance. I read Homer and Herodotus at a fairly young age. I am very familiar with ancient Greek history, myths and philosophy. Don Quixote, French classics such as Molière, Racine, Corneille and later Balzac, Baudelaire and others were part of my secondary school curriculum. For the 'baccalauréat', I had to study Sartre along with Césaire and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, after having been introduced earlier to Soyinka, Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono or Eskia Mphahlele.

But some of the master-images that have influenced my life as a scholar are actual places and cities that became the vehicle for intellectual effervescence. I arrived in Paris at a time when the city was pushing its working population from the center to the 'banlieues'. The deprived classes – among whom there was a sizable number from France's ex-colonies – formed an immense cordon around the well off. In the early 1980's, the intellectual scene was still dominated by powerful figures such as Michel Foucault, Fernand Braudel, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Paul Veyne, Cornelius Castoriadis, Raymond Aron, Jacques Derrida, Michel de Certeau. I have been very much influenced by post-war French thought and culture – Merleau-Ponty, Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski, all of whom I read by myself.

But if in Paris I had been introduced to the French tradition of abstract universalism, it is in New York that I was able, for the first time, to enter into contact with the global world. For instance, New York allowed me to realize how the French version of universalism expressed itself in a language that was, in the end, quite narcissistic, monocolored and provincial. As a city and as a movement of the mind, I was literally seduced by New York. For the first time in my life, I could distinctly hear the clamoring of worlds, the rustling echoes of that juxtaposition of races and nations and ethnicities the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor had spoken of. I could see the swarms of peoples and colours, hear the cacophony of voices and sounds.

Here I encountered far more than in Paris an African counterpart in the African-American. African-Americans had been the city until the draft riots of 1863 when working-class Irish rampaged through their small neighborhoods, forcing them to flee to Brooklyn. They started coming back around the mid-1860s mostly from the South; then in large numbers in the 1910s, with an influx from the West Indies. By that time Harlem was well on its way to becoming the cultural capital of what Paul Gilroy has called "the Black Atlantic". Now, I too wanted to be a full participant in that long epiphany. During my years in New York I would go to Harlem to buy black radical literature and black music, to listen to street preachers or to watch a performance at the Apollo Theater. It is there that I first saw a performance by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti.

Oboe: The "Black Atlantic" is at the heart of the critical investigation and the artistic production of many African-American scholars and artists, and of some African and Black British intellectuals who dialogue with America. What is your relationship with the "black canon" that finds its roots in the thought of W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Alain Locke, and continues today through the more recent contributions of Mudimbe, Diawara, Appiah, Gilroy, Masilela ...

Mbembe: This is a very complex archive and I cannot pretend to have mastered it in any comprehensive manner. For historical reasons, its canon has been, and is still, dominated by "Western blacks" – the descendants of African slaves in the New World. A new African diaspora – of which Valentin Mudimbe, Kwame A. Appiah, Ato Quayson and many others are distinguished members – is now forcefully contributing to this archive, in line with the transnational character of this tradition.

In this field, Paul Gilroy has been my teacher. Reading him, I have understood the history of the Black Atlantic to be one of "being-toward-the-world" – a history that keeps throwing us back to the question of freedom, to what goes by the name of freedom.

Less well known are thinkers such as Fabien

Fimmvörðuháls
Photo: Flikr/Ulrich Latzenhofer

Éboussi Boulaga or Jean-Marc Éla. They both belong to a tradition of critical thought that owes a debt to that master-image we have called Christianity – which by the way has been the object of a sustained critique in their respective thought. I have found their work extremely fruitful, almost as fruitful as a certain lineage of Jewish thought I am personally attached to – the line that goes from Frantz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch to Jacques Derrida.

Oboe: In your thinking about Africa and through Africa you use a combination of analytical tools, productively straddling the disciplinary boundaries of history, philosophy, politics and critical theory. Literature and the arts also offer useful inputs. In On the Postcolony, for example, they come into focus when you deal with contemporary time in the postcolony, and the references are to Sony Labou Tansi and Ahmadou Kourouma, but also Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri. Of course the choice of authors is relevant here – death and the shadow line between death and life, the confusion of the two realms, is highlighted in your discourse and in theirs. Do you think the arts are able to talk about Africa today in ways that other disciplines cannot? What is the place of African literature and aesthetics in your work?

Mbembe: This is a very troubled period of our history in Africa. The sensory – but also aesthetic – meaning of this moment is best captured by art and literature, music, dance and religious praxis. From these genres, I have learnt that there is a sensory experience of our lives that encompasses innumerable unnamed and un-nameable shapes, hues and textures that "objective knowledge" has failed to capture. These genres tell us about how ordinary people laugh and weep, work, play, pray, bless and curse, make a space to stand forth and walk. They also document the everyday consciousness of the finite, vulnerable and mortal character of our existence, the excess energies generated by our societies and their attempt at being born again to the world. Art and literature, music, dance and religious praxis have given a space and a voice to the structures of affirmation and negation in our experience and provided us with the language and conceptual frameworks to describe this experience as an affirmation of a universal human condition. This is the reason why I have been interested in them. For me, they are not simply aesthetic and psychic practices. They are also intellectual and even philosophical acts.

Sony Labou Tansi taught me that there is something jarred, something flagrantly perverse, something pornographic in the way power is exercised in the postcolony.

Literature and music in particular are also practices of desecration. From Sony Labou Tansi for instance, I have learnt more about power than I could have from any political science treatise. More than anybody else, he shows that perversion is the force proper to power and its body in the postcolony; that there is something jarred, something flagrantly perverse, something pornographic in the way in which power is exercised in the postcolony. In fact, in its form and content, power is fundamentally a disjunctive structure, a form of transgressive disjunction. It is Labou Tansi who taught me about the link between power and grammar – the fact that power is oddly verbose, a convoluted speech; or that it likes speaking from underneath a skirt (*le jupon*), in a unique coming together of theology and pornology, mimetic argumentation and syllogistic pantomime and how, because of its intrinsic ambiguity and equivocity, the body more than anything else destabilizes all forms of domination. I owe him one of the core theses of *On the Postcolony* – the conviviality of the oppressors and the oppressed.

More fundamentally, what attracts me to these forms is that each involves a paradoxical and at times risky play with limits – both the limits set by moral or political categories and those that shape language and style, thought and meaning. I say "risky" because a major feature and the quiet force of African aesthetics is the way it apprehends human existence, finitude and possibilities. Classical West and Central African sculpture, for instance, tends to see every moment or instant of human existence as both entirely fortuitous and at the same time utterly singular. In Amos Tutuola for instance, existence is only ever a repetition of fortuitous instances. It is

made up of points of intensity that are never stable because they are perpetually caught up in a play of repetition and non-identity. In fact, identity itself is only established at the very moment of its dissolution, through acts of extreme exposure, dispossession and repossession. There is nothing that could resemble a linear history. Whatever the case, in the best traditions of African literature, art and music, existence is always in excess of thought. Existence is in fact an impossible object of thought. It can only enter the realm of thought in the mode of a parody, analogy or endless permeability.

Oboe: At the heart of your writing is the need to rethink Africa through the variety of experiences that constitute the archives of African life and knowledge. What are the most promising ways and routes to this end?

Rethinking Africa is at one a political, an ethical, aesthetic and intellectual project. It is also a complex, irritating and exhilarating enterprise. Part of the difficulty in rethinking Africa has to do with the crisis of language. When it comes to matters African, it is almost always as if our language were afflicted by a hole right at its center. Let's call it "the night of language", the sleep of language. Our language almost always seems to hollow out the human experience it is called upon to represent, that is, to bring to life. Until we resolve this crisis of language, we will not be able to bring Africa back to life.

When it comes to matters African, it is almost always as if our language is afflicted by a hole right at its center. Let's call it the night of language.

In any case, writing the world from Africa, this is how I understand the project of theory and criticism – to bring back to life that which is asleep, that which has been put to sleep; to bring back to life that which is threatened by the forces of the night.

It appears to me that to rethink Africa in the world, we will have to regenerate language itself, expand the dictionary, confront the question of the archive, and allow for as many forms of criticism as possible – prophetic, apocalyptic, pictorial, musical, poetic, oneiric. Multiple languages will have to be brought to bear on the task of bringing Africa back to life in contemporary theorizing.

Oboe: From this viewpoint, living in post-apartheid South Africa must have given you the possibility to see the birth of new expressive modalities, the experimenting with new languages. What do you think of the recent South African experience, and what is your position in relation to the country's situation today?

Mbembe: Intellectually, I have found the South African experiment to be crucial in my understanding of the world we live in. I am very grateful to South Africa for what it has given me. It is here that I started, for the first time, to seriously think about what the "African modern" or African forms of worldliness could actually look like. It is also here that I started, for the first time, to seriously think about the future – or futurity – as a political question. I quickly realized that the future cannot be interrogated from the point of view of the political unless our manner of interrogation simultaneously opens the possibility of reinvention of our sense of the past; of language itself, and therefore of praxis. Interrogating the future makes sense insofar as it helps us to reflect critically on some figure of the present – the present as that vulnerable space, that precarious and elusive entry-point through which, hopefully, a radically different life might make its appearance. But there is no future without hope – the hope that we might bring this radically different temporal life into being as a concrete social possibility, as a systemic transformation in the logic of our being-in-common as human beings.

What strikes me now is the liquid character both of the present and of the future, their dizziness, their mirage-like qualities, and the weakness in our grip on the future in particular. And I wonder whether there is a direct relationship between the liquidity of the present and the overwhelming feeling, right now, in South Africa, of the elusiveness of the future. I see many people yearning for – I would not say a return to the past – but something they could recognize as stable, as commonsensical. People are yearning for some sense of tangible certainty and solidity, some originary simplicity, something unmixed, somehow pure. They know from experience that the end of apartheid and the advent of democracy have not provided this simplicity. If anything, democracy has made life even more complex than before. It also strikes me that many live their life as if the present had betrayed them; as if democracy, the law, the Constitution and the future altogether had betrayed them. And I wonder how we can interpret this shattering experience and the turn to an everyday politics of expediency rather than to a demanding, disciplined politics of hope, of principle and possibility.