Africa (2022), **92**, 49–70
doi:10.1017/S0001972021000863

IAI AFRICA

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Provisional notes on the postcolony' in Congo studies: an overview of themes and debates

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Abstract

This article considers the uptake of Achille Mbembe's article 'Provisional notes on the postcolony' (1992), the book *De la Postcolonie: essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporain* (2000) and its translated version, *On the Postcolony* (2001), in Congo studies. 'Congo' here is a shorthand for the current Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly known as Zaire. The article is concerned with the ways in which these two English-language texts (and their original French versions) figure in the social sciences and the humanities, specifically in the field of study relating to Zairian/Congolese society and culture. It becomes clear that the theme of mutual entanglements of *commandement* (power) and citizens not only influences political studies but also structures Congo scholarship on economy and governance, popular culture and erotics. The article ends with some reflections on academic writing about Congo, the limited uptake of 'Provisional notes' and *On the Postcolony* in religious studies, questions about ethics and scientific writing about political postcolonial cultures, and especially the necessity to historicize the postcolony.

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse à l'utilisation faite de l'article d'Achille Mbembe « Notes provisoires sur la postcolonie » (1992), de son ouvrage *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (2000) et de sa version traduite, *On the Postcolony* (2001), dans les études sur le Congo. Le terme Congo est ici l'abréviation de l'actuelle république démocratique du Congo, ex-Zaïre. Cet article traite de la manière dont les deux textes de langue anglaise (et leurs versions françaises d'origine) figurent en sciences sociales et en lettres et sciences humaines, en particulier dans le domaine d'étude concernant la société et la culture zaïroises/congolaises. Il apparait clairement que le thème des intrications mutuelles du *commandement* (pouvoir) et des citoyens non seulement influence les études politiques, mais aussi structure la recherche sur l'économie et la gouvernance, la culture populaire et l'érotique au Congo. L'article conclut par des réflexions sur les travaux universitaires sur le Congo, l'utilisation limitée des « Notes provisoires » et de l'ouvrage *On the Postcolony* dans les études religieuses, des questions sur l'éthique et les travaux scientifiques concernant les cultures postcoloniales politiques, et en particulier la nécessité d'historiser la postcolonie.

This article considers the uptake of Achille Mbembe's article 'Provisional notes on the postcolony' (1992), the book *De la Postcolonie: essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporain* (2000), and its translated version, *On the Postcolony* (2001), in Congo studies. 'Congo' here is a shorthand for the current Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly known as Zaire. I am concerned with the ways in which these two texts (and their French original versions) figure in the social sciences and the humanities where the main field of study is Zairian/Congolese society and culture.

Attention to the intimate connections between these two texts and the study of Zairian/Congolese society is relevant for several reasons. First, although Mbembe's work reflects mainly on Cameroonian political and social worlds, he often engages with scholarship on Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire, thus extending the scope of his theorizing to the larger Congo Basin. Paul Biya and Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko are equally illustrative of the postcolonial *commandement* (power, leadership, governance). Second, for his analyses, Mbembe drew extensively on scientific writings about colonial and postcolonial Congo/Zaire.[1] For his 'Provisional notes' article, Mbembe relied on the work of social and cultural historian Bogumil Jewsiewicki as well as political scientists Michael Schatzberg and Tom Callaghy. This Congo library was significantly extended for the monograph (*On the Postcolony*), where Mbembe builds on the writings of Janet MacGaffey on the informal economy, Catherine Newbury on the privatization of the state in Zaire, Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers on death culture in Zaire, Crawford Young on the dissolved state, Jewsiewicki again on economic history, Edmund Morel on the violence enacted by the colonial *commandement*, and religious historian Anne Hilton on conversions in ancient Congo. The monograph also contains Zairian paintings (depicting the *Bula Matari*). Several of these authors are acknowledged in the preface of *On the Postcolony*, suggesting that Mbembe had personal interactions with them. Third, as Mbembe once confided in me,[2] he wrote *On the Postcolony* during the night, with Congolese rumba music playing in the background. He mused that his monograph should be read to the Congolese rumba rhythms of Koffi Olomide, J. B. Mpiana, Papa Wemba, Tshala Muana and other Congolese rumba musicians he appreciates.[3]

For the purpose of this part issue, I am limiting the scope of my overview of Mbembe's influence on Congo studies to the ways in which Congo scholars have engaged with the article and the monograph. This explains why articles and book chapters in which authors do not explicitly cite or engage with either of these two texts are not included in this overview. I will refer to both texts in a combined manner as '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony'.

Before moving on, some caveats are in order. First, this overview is limited to texts published in English and French. Scholarly work in German, Portuguese, Spanish,

[1] Obviously, Mbembe has been inspired by scholars working in other fields and in areas other than Zaire: for example, Jean-François Bayart, Béatrice Hibou and Janet Roitman. Because this article concerns the impact of two texts, and not their genealogy, I do not explore the 'making of' Mbembe's theory on the postcolony. Such an intellectual exercise remains to be carried out.

[2] Personal conversation, 2012.

[3] Mbembe honed in more explicitly on Zairian/Congolese culture in his article 'Variations on the beautiful in the Congolese world of sounds' (2005).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Russian or any other language has not been included. Furthermore, I chose not to include any PhD theses.

For obvious reasons, the earliest texts I found were published in 1993. The bibliography runs to mid-2019. While I regret that the bibliography is not exhaustive, I believe that I have found most of the writings that dialogue explicitly (even if only referencing Mbembe's texts in schematic fashion) with '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony'.

While retrieving the texts that cite '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony', I was surprised to find no, or very few, references in the works of several colleagues. I contacted some, asking whether theirs was a conscious choice. Various reasons were mentioned for not engaging explicitly with the material: some scholars are not knowledgeable about Mbembe's scholarship; others tend to avoid it; still others have internalized Mbembe's theories to such an extent that they do not see it as being relevant any more to dialogue with the texts; and some scholars prefer to ignore his work because of disagreement.

Significantly, researchers and professors to whom I reached out and who are based in Kinshasa hardly know of Mbembe or his scholarship. Some have never heard his name, while others had, in particular because of his leadership at CODESRIA (1996–2000), but could not remember having read any of his publications, nor could they do more than situate him as a historian or even as an anthropologist. I see various explanations for this lack of engagement with Mbembe's scholarship in Kinshasa's academic world. First, much if not most Congolese academic writing has a strong applied focus and aims at contributing to social, economic and political challenges on a national and local level. This orientation pushes scholars to formulate applied rather than theoretical research questions, for which other libraries are more relevant. The second explanation connects to a more widespread critique among francophone African colleagues, which accuses Mbembe of defending colonialism and of 'writing for the whites'.[4] These reflections open up pressing analytical space regarding the reception of academic writing in contemporary Congolese universities and academic institutions.

A second caveat addresses the subjective aspect of organizing the material. There are various ways to group the texts that refer to '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony'. One way would be to order the material chronologically or along geographical lines. These divisions would yield fascinating insights into the politics of scholarship in the last three decades. However, such a project merits a wider analytical gaze than offered here. I decided to start with Mbembe's key argument, on the mutual entanglements of state–citizen relationships. In the following sections, it will become clear that this theme not only influences political studies, but it also structures Congo scholarship on economy and governance, on popular culture and on erotics. The article ends with some reflections on academic writing about Congo, the limited uptake of '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony' in religious studies, questions about ethics, and especially the necessity to historicize the postcolony.

[4] Around 2010, I encountered a Cameroonian philosopher in Kinshasa who was very explicit in this critique. One of the reviewers echoed this critical attitude towards Mbembe's positioning within the academic landscape as well, and even drew an analogy with criticism voiced in Gabon towards Gabonese/Congolese sociologist Joseph Tonda.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

On *commandement* and conviviality/cohabitation

Probably the most important, influential but also controversial analytical line of '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony' is a radical approach to state–citizen relationships. The basic tenet of Mbembe's theory is that the postcolonial state, embodied by various kinds of functionaries and the president himself, is intrinsically entwined with citizens, even to the extent of interdependence. Key words in the analysis of these entanglements are '*commandement*', 'the ludic subject', 'zombification', 'arbitrariness' and 'illicit cohabitation'. The lens of cohabitation helps to account for the complexities of everyday life instead of reducing these to simple binary relationships (domination/resistance) (Mbembe 2001: 103). 'Aesthetics of vulgarity' refer, among other things, to hyperbolic spectacles surrounding such events: for instance, welcoming a president back to his country as he drives into the capital from the airport. Pierre Petit and George Mulambwa Mutambwa's attention to idioms of poverty and crisis in Lubumbashi shows that linguistics is very much part of the conviviality between citizens and *commanders* (postcolonial leaders). Lushois (Lubumbashi) citizens borrowed Mobutu's famous quotation '*Moto na moto abongisa*' (Let each person sort things [out at his own level]) in light of Mobutu's kleptocratic behaviour, but reinterpreted it ironically as 'an invitation for each and everyone to steal at his own level of responsibility' (Petit and Mulambwa Mutambwa 2005: 481–2). Mbembe's theory of cohabitation thus calls for a rethinking of political subjectivities beyond the conventional political division of state and civil society.

While it seems obvious that Zaire's Mobutu would have been the signature *commander*, most scholarly analyses in Congo studies engage with a study of *commandement* on a lower, more intimate level: that is, in the relationships between state agents and citizens. Indeed, for Mbembe, *commandement* is not only the *potentat*, the dictator, but it is also performed and embodied by 'agents [including] the party, policemen, soldiers, administrators and officials, middlemen, and dealers' (1992: 10). This concept of *commandement* has inspired Congo scholars to read the political practices of citizens and lower graded political actors as events in which postcolonial political subjectivities are expressed and confirmed. A wonderful example is the ethnographic exploration of the interaction among public powers, 'big men' and street children in Lubumbashi during the early years of Joseph Kabila's regime (2002–06). Olivier Tabu Kahola and Benjamin Rubbers (2008) studied street children's violent and ludic behaviours, as well as their various economic practices for survival. They characterize interactions between *grands* ('big men') and *petits* ('small boys', the street children) as 'ambiguous' and oscillating 'between collaboration and confrontation' (*ibid.*: 34), and they argue that these should not be read as 'tactics' because this concept obscures the 'intimate tyranny' that undergirds such practices (*ibid.*: 32–4).

Filip De Boeck's writings on political subjectivities in Kinshasa and south-west Zaire (as the country was called until 1997) engage more immediately and critically with Mbembe's reading of the autocrat. For example, in his analysis of local strategies for survival and resilience in the face of collapsing national structures in Kinshasa, Kikwit, and cross-border labour migration during the 1990s, De Boeck (1996) builds further on Mbembe's analysis of processes of democratization 'from below'. The advantage of Mbembe's (and Jean-François Bayart's) study is, so De Boeck argues, that Mbembe calls for attention to be paid to 'the *praxis* of the postcolonial state'; yet De

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Boeck regrets that neither the concept of the state nor the relationship between 'above' and 'below' is fully problematized by Mbembe. During the Mobutu years, there was an illegality that was initiated by the state itself. This type of illegality spread from the centre to other layers of society and became enmeshed in international networks of, among others, the arms trade, diamond and petrol traffic, and the laundering of narco-dollars. The Zairian state could not control these networks, while still being fully entangled in them.

Because of the increasing blurring of the boundaries of the state apparatus, 'everybody works politics' (De Boeck 1996: 97). In such a context, cohabitation is a new dynamic model of interaction 'between multiple, dialectically interdependent, socio-political and cultural spaces and groups, linked to one another in constantly shifting hierarchies that are defined by the personalistic strategies of the dinosaurs and of other actors on the local and the global level' (*ibid.*).

The intimate tyranny not only translates into shared discursive expressions and common extractive economic practices; as Iniguez de Heredia's research on international peace keeping and state building in eastern Congo (2012) shows, it also pushes Congolese citizens to engage in physical violence themselves. Citizens use violent methods to secure themselves and to pursue their own political and economic agendas. It may even be argued that people are able to survive in this continued violent setting only by participating in the violence themselves (*ibid.*: 84). As in Mbembe's postcolony, the Congolese state does not have a monopoly on violence and authority. Furthermore, there are thin divisions between local militias, which are filling in a void left by the Congolese state, and populations. However, reprising a discourse that opposes state and citizens, rather than emphasizing the entanglements, Iniguez de Heredia reads the use of violence as a form of resistance, which paradoxically 'takes the form not of an organized direct confrontation, but rather of a quotidian strategy of mitigation, avoidance and escapism' (*ibid.*: 88). In this context, civil society provides a platform for resistance strategies, rather than being a partner in state building.

The use of violence as a form of continued engagement with *commandement* probably resonates most in the image of the soldier, which has become a preferred model of masculinity in various parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Ethnographic research on masculinities in Kinshasa, south-western Congo and the Katanga area (De Boeck 2000; Pype 2007; Makori 2017) shows that boys and young men in urban and rural Congo eagerly take on the figure of the *soda* (soldier). Among Kinshasa's street fighters, the *soda* is admired because of his close connection with a militaristic state; the *soda* then embodies the postcolonial 'strong fighter', the ideal type of masculinity with which to confront state violence, often described as a major challenge posed to contemporary citizens (Pype 2007). Timothy Makori (2017) encountered a similar fascination with the image of the soldier among young *creuseurs* (diggers) looking for copper and other promising minerals in the abandoned Gécamines mines. Makori interprets the self-designated likening of *creuseurs* to soldiers as 'a didactic response to an autocratic, masculine, hierarchical and often arbitrary postcolonial state whose modality of power does not necessarily appeal to reason in public life but to the whims, drives, sensations, pleasures and pains of its elites, who are its main beneficiaries' (*ibid.*: 795). This, Makori admits, may be 'a contemporary manifestation of the internalization of the

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violent histories that created the Congolese state and continue to perpetuate its existence' (*ibid*.).

Even though the soldier is admired in these spaces, research by Maria Eriksson-Baaz (2019) nuances the overall attractiveness of the soldier's image. Soldiering is perceived as one among the rare options available to the poor. High-ranking officers with means may be celebrated. But, after all, many parents do not want their children to enrol in the army. Furthermore, people know very well that soldiers are badly treated by the state, and that they resort to harassment enacted on the citizens whom they are supposed to protect. This has led to various negative monikers for soldiers: *faux tête* (dishonest people), *batu ya pamba* (worthless people), *miyibi* (thieves), *beggars*, etc.

All in all, a 'Mbembian' reading of state–citizen relationships pushes us to think not only of various types of '*commandement*' – for example, the president, politicians, bureaucrats, soldiers and the police – but also invites us to rethink how these figures of power are sources of both physical and symbolic violence, eliciting various reactions from citizens. Following Mbembe's definition, postcolonial power is ambiguous: it consists of the enactment of force, imposition and control, while, as discussed in the following section, leaving room for bargaining, negotiating, mimicry and laughter.

Ludic subjects

Mbembe has defined the postcolonial citizen as a *homo ludens*, engaged in alternative, more playful engagements with autocracy and postcolonial *commandement*. These are the main ways in which postcolonial subjects mobilize 'not just a single identity for themselves but several, which are flexible enough for them to negotiate as and when required' (Mbembe 1992: 5).

My own research (Pype 2016) has shown how mobile phones in particular opened up spaces for contestation and mockery during both the Mobutu years and Joseph Kabila's regime, but they did so in different ways. Mobutu installed mobile telephony as a tool of surveillance; the mobile phone thus became, through the insertion of secret service state agents equipped with (highly visible) Motorola devices, the state's omnipresent 'ear'. In response, Zairian citizens engaged playfully with this new tool of surveillance, control and disciplining in surprising ways, for example by enacting self-censorship ('*not* talking like a Motorola'). In the Kabila years, when mobile phones became more widespread among the population, new ways of 'toying with power' emerged: they anonymized their caller ID and intimidated leaders over such anonymous calls; they took on the identities of false police and military men; or they deployed other forms of anonymizing one's identity. The cohabitation between leadership and citizens continued to thrive while citizens clearly avoided overt confrontation and critique.

Ethnographic research in northern Congo and on the border between the DRC and Rwanda reveals other forms of ludic behaviour. Thomas Hendriks' (2022) ethnography of a logging concession in the north of the DRC, for example, illustrates how a public performance, such as a Labour Day march (1 May), turned into a moment of irony and ridicule. The 2010 parade was mostly comprised of people who did not earn a salary, who were unemployed, or who had been rendered redundant. Yet, Hendriks (*ibid*.: 65) writes, 'Cynicism, nostalgia, irony and anger spread through the audience, as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

onlookers ecstatically moved forwards and were pushed back by police, laughing, shouting, or shaking their heads in shame.' Here, the ludic and the lucid joined in an event that expressed 'stuckness'; nobody really expected any immediate change.

In Goma, the city's inhabitants 'played' in a different manner. These inhabitants, as Karen Büscher and Gillian Mathys (2013) described, strategically played with identities by manipulating and mobilizing discourse on autochthony. Birere is a lively neighbourhood in Goma and the heart of an informal trade network that spans the Congolese–Rwandan border. The area is supposed to be a neutral zone between the two countries. Here, the *enfants de Birere* (children of Birere) enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) more opportunities because of this zone's hybrid character. More specifically, border life in Birere evolved around exploitation of the differences between the two states: Rwanda with its well-organized administrative structure and state apparatus and a fully functioning army, versus the DRC, marked by a dysfunctional state and loose military apparatus.

International relations scholars have drawn on Mbembe's '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony' to unravel the thick and complex relationships between the Congolese population and foreign power blocs, of which the UN Mission for the Congo (initially MONUC; since 2010 called MONUSCO) is probably the best known, although numerous other international governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also build alliances with local political and economic actors and become influential in the fields of securitization and economic development and interfere in citizen–state relationships. Such international efforts erode the *commandement*'s claims on sovereignty and inspire Congolese to engage in ludic interactions with the 'international' *commandement*. Iniguez de Heredia's research documents the ways in which Congolese citizens rob the international community of its 'selfless' status; they mock this community and thus point 'to the hypocrisy of power, to other possible agendas and to the lack of commitment to power's own discourse' (2012: 80). Slogans such as 'No Nkunda, no job' express the population's awareness of the complicity between the UN corps and Congo's inefficient government, and of the UN's role in the continuation of rebel violence in the country. Word play such as saying 'Monic' (instead of MONUC)[5] and 'Monuscol' (instead of MONUSCO) portrays UN workers as more enticed by Congolese nightlife and *ambiance* culture (Skol being a popular brand of beer) than by their peacekeeping mission. These kinds of ludic expressions distance Congolese from foreign power-holders. Fortunately, Iniguez de Heredia is able to bring in the perspective of international workers as well. UN officials and diplomats also resort to 'bad-mouthing techniques to justify their indispensability'. These elites tag Congolese as 'corrupt', 'lazy', 'opportunistic', 'selfish' or 'backward' (*ibid.*).

Iniguez de Heredia's research shows that the study of humour and political entanglement requires refinement. Humour (and its diverse forms) is embedded within relationships, including relationships of power and contemporary manifestations

[5] By changing the official name of the UN's Mission for the Congo, MONUC, into 'Monic', a female first name, Congolese evoke the various rumours about sexual entanglements between UN workers and the local population. The distortion is a playful alert to the international community informing them that the local population is aware of these hidden and intimate transgressions in the humanitarian world.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of postcolonial *commandement*.[6] Questions that emerge include: When does humour turn into mockery and satire? And what are the political meanings of scabrous shouts and gestures?[7]

Private indirect government and 'the fragmented state'

In political science and economic studies of the DRC, it seems that, rather than the article 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', the chapter on 'private indirect government'[8] in the monograph *On the Postcolony* has served as an inspiration. Here, Mbembe pays attention to the 'fragmentation of public authority and emergence of multiple forms of *private indirect government*' (2001: 67), which have produced a particular context of 'entanglement' (*ibid.*: 66). This is considered first and foremost as a consequence of the economic crises of the 1980s and subsequent structural adjustment, leading to coercion, human suffering, scarcity, destitution, appropriation of means of livelihood, allocation of profits, and various types of extraction. 'Fiscality' is the keyword here. And, as Mbembe showed, these multiple forms of private indirect government relate to the colonial economy; yet Congo scholars hardly engage with this *longue durée* and prefer to read these as manifestations of a weak, inefficient and maybe even corrupt postcolonial state.

In their study of the public education sector in the DRC, Kristof Titeca and Tom De Herdt (2011) examine similar dynamics of the privatization of governance, which they describe as part of the 'negotiated nature of statehood'. Public services continue to be provided but the state has been reduced to an administrative framework, while private operators perform state obligations and functions. Titeca and De Herdt argue, quoting Mbembe, that this situation has led to a 'proliferation of more or less autonomous pockets of what was, until recently, a system or a de facto decentralization'. This discharge provides local state actors with a considerable degree of autonomy, which they can 'enjoy' – that is, they can exert power and violence and benefit from taxes (*ibid.*: 217) – yet it also generates a lack of coherence in the national education system.

The bulk, perhaps, of economic and political research in the DRC engages with conflict-ridden eastern Congo, shedding a different light on postcolonial governance when compared with the capital city. Various economic and political structures and events have combined in this zone of instability and insecurity: decades of violent interventions by transnational rebel factions and an underpaid national army; the rule of ever changing economic alliances, global economic capital and international

[6] Clara Devlieger's ethnographic research among disabled communities in Kinshasa transfers *homo ludens* to the power difference within the ethnographer–research subject relationship (2018). Here, we gain a deeper insight into the mobilization of Kinois' lucid engagements with foreign scholars, who – probably often inadvertently – might come to embody a particular *commandement* vis-à-vis their interlocutors in certain instances.

[7] Nancy R. Hunt has studied the importance of humour, satire and mockery in colonial Congo (2016) and in Belgian society during the colonial period (2002). Her work is in a continuous dialogue with Mbembe's writings: they have influenced each other and continue to do so.

[8] This idea of 'private indirect government' was developed in collaboration with Jean-François Bayart (1989) and Béatrice Hibou (1998; 1999). The discharge of the state (Bayart's notion of the *décharge*) is discussed further in Mbembe and Roitman (1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

humanitarian aid forces; and a (comfortable?) distance from the political heart of national politics.

Koen Vlassenroot (2008) identified the various players in this informal privatization of government (and state violence) in eastern Congo: rebel movements, militias (armed groups, warlords and economic–military alliances), wealthy businessmen and international NGOs. All these parties increasingly engage in providing security, service delivery and regulation. The collaboration between rebel forces and economic actors has created a situation of mutual benefit, where opportunities are shared between militias and opportunistic businessmen (traders, middlemen and outright criminals) (Büscher 2012: 491). Patience Kabamba therefore urges more research 'on the initiatives of non-state agents in this post-colonial period, especially on the production of cross-border social order and economic management' (2012: 6).

Amidst the constant threats emanating from warlords and rebel leaders, new economic and political opportunities and novel leaders arise. These take advantage of their distance from Kinshasa, and from the fact that national borders allow for hybridity, escape and opportunity. In *The Great African War: Congo and regional geopolitics, 1996–2006*, Filip Reyntjens quotes Mbembe at length regarding the various forms of power, controlled by and controlling 'the interests of international middlemen, businessmen, and dealers, and those of local plutocrats (Mbembe 2001: 92–3) because [Mbembe] perfectly captures the situation in the Great Lakes Region' (2009: 222). Reyntjens is particularly inspired by Mbembe's argument of the 'satellization' (small, autonomous pockets) of entire provinces leading to (much) smaller but stronger states and to the emergence of new forms of privatized governance.[9]

James Smith and Jeffrey Mantz (2006: 83) take a more global perspective and focus on international economic ventures. They follow Mbembe to argue how the fragmented nature of the Congolese state plays out in favour of other nation states and multinational corporations that are able to gain control over the economy of conflict minerals. The structural instability of postcolonial power allows for alliances to be constantly made and remade, while borders can gain or lose meaning depending on the durability of alliances. However, Smith and Mantz warn that 'fragmentation is paralleled by new forms of consolidation and empire: most conspicuously, China's demand for mineral resources, including coltan, tin, and gold' (*ibid.*).

Apart from Chinese private investment in Congo's extractive economy, other international players operate in the DRC, exerting power and interfering in state–citizen relationships. Especially since the mid-2000s, international donors have returned to the DRC, after both Mobutu and Laurent Kabila refused international aid during the 1990s. They have tried to forge stability in the DRC through technical reforms of state institutions and direct investment in mining, telecommunications and banking. Such donors had the explicit ambition to prevent the personal enrichment of local elites.

However, as critical international relations scholars Christopher Vogel and Jason Stearns (2018) argue, this has hardly been successful, largely due to the continuation of postcolonial ways of governing Zaire into the 2000s. The lack of a new, independent, power centre favoured small, more or less 'autonomous', pockets and enabled the continuation of violence on the state's periphery and the mobilization of ethnic

[9] Mbembe's concept of the satellization of the state is very much indebted to Bayart's theory of the African state (1989). Mbembe contributed to the influence of Bayart's theories in anglophone academia.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sentiment, leading to 'pit[ting] opponents against each other, and warn[ing] against the dangers of democracy' (*ibid.*: 702). One of these 'pockets' of power is Goma, the capital of North Kivu Province, located on the Rwandan border. Here, the state is incapable of 'uphold[ing] law and order and [delivering] basic public services' because of 'its critical impoverishment ... dynamics of war and the fact that its authority and power are increasingly challenged by several non-state actors' (Büscher 2012: 484). On the one hand, the state is physically very present in the form of military and police units and due to the proliferation of taxation services; on the other, 'these services do not operate under what we understand as a state in classical terms' insofar as 'the state has no privileged monopolistic position as the only agency providing security, welfare and representation; it has to share authority, legitimacy and capacity with other institutions' (*ibid.*).

Elsewhere in the DRC, for example in southern Katanga, the politics of indirect discharge has produced a different 'transnationalised bubble of governance' (Hönke 2010: 126), as research on the role of mineral companies in the copper and cobalt mining areas in southern Katanga tells us. Here, since the early 2000s, multinationals have overseen security. The discharge occurs doubly: there is a release of power from the Congolese state, for which it is convenient to outsource security operations, but also from multinational companies and the international community, whose centres of decision making, governance and control are often far away, located elsewhere on the continent, or even outside Africa.

Such double discharge has favoured the emergence of new, sovereign islands of power and authority, and of new political topographies. One example is the logging concession, as studied by Hendriks (2015) in northern Congo. When the central government, in need of cash, sold the exploitation rights to a foreign company, the concession emerged as a 'state of exception'. The corporate power 'mostly operated along Mbembe's postcolonial lines: an unpredictable and grotesque explosion of sudden violence interrupting a generalizing neglect and disinterest in sustained surveillance' (*ibid.*: 165), while the company engaged in displays and ceremonies of *commandement*, requiring people 'to sing or dance or wriggle their bodies about in the sun' (*ibid.*: 164).

Hendriks is one of the rare Congo scholars who explicitly draw connections between the *commandement* in such a pocket of power – the logging concession – and colonial political culture. The expat workers at the logging concession 'loved to depict their world in Conradian strokes' (2022: 190). Coloniality served as an idiom for speaking about the logging labourers, the temporalities of the logging endeavour, and the relationships within this extractive economy. Hendriks furthermore relies on one of Mbembe's key tropes of '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony', 'madness', to make sense of expats' daily life in the concession. In Mbembe's words (2001: 116), the authoritative yet dehumanizing work of the colonial project, thriving on 'an economy of death', has laid the basis for a 'whole hermeneutics' of 'madness, pleasure, and intoxication' (*ibid.*: 115). Craziness, absurdity and ecstasy ran through exploratory expeditions in the early and mid-colonial eras (Fabian 2000); these experiences and their cultivation are fundamental to the postcolonial othering performed by expats in a logging concession in the 2010s (Hendriks 2022: 190–205).

Congo scholars discussed in this section have shown how fragmentation of state power meant a weakening of national power on the one hand, and an opening up of the possibility for new, aspiring power blocs to emerge on the other. The Zairian/

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Congolese state did not always manage to reproduce its own power in cities, towns and economic zones, yet the style of postcolonial statecraft and governance was performed by other sources of power and capital. Ultimately, this fragmentation did – or does – not make a big difference for the citizens. Congolese inhabiting islands of private *commandement* remained – and remain – very dependent on non-state authority and influence, and in similar ambiguous, violent and brutal ways.

Popular culture and the body

It is probably in the study of African popular culture that '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony' has been most influential. Mbembe analysed music, cartoons, laughter and public festivals both as platforms for interactions between those in power and their subjects and as fundamental to the whole makeup of the postcolony itself. This methodology has grown out of a combination of aesthetic and political concerns (Mbembe 2006: 152). For Mbembe, postcolonial power is a hollow sign, a hallucinatory and extremely violent mode of exerting influence and extracting power from postcolonial subjects. Banal, everyday popular culture sounds loud in this political project; it is excessive in order to hide the shallow grounds from which it springs. Given that popular culture is a zone of aesthetic and embodied meaning making, it is not surprising that, in the postcolony, the body is a privileged space through which the *potentat*'s brutality arrives in the minds of postcolonial subjects.

Various scholars of Zaire's and the DRC's popular culture have echoed these statements and analyse how cultural leaders embed citizens' singing, dancing, laughing bodies in postcolonial power. For example, White (2008: 15–16) argues that Zairian/Congolese popular music is insightful 'because of how it uses – and how it is used by – the institutions of power'. In his ethnography *Rumba Rules* (2008), White dissects how officialdom makes use of the voices of music, and how structural and stylistic elements of artistic expression are tied to long-term political delinquency and neglect. Along the lines of 'cohabitation', White reminds us that we should see these factors not so much as resistance but as 'an agonistic dance with power' (*ibid.*: 16), and this is part of what makes popular dance music so political. Postcolonial power is embodied in the act of performance.

Referring to the schisms and the lineages that organize and shape the internal politics of Congolese popular culture, White further observes how *commandement* and violent coercion are reproduced at lower levels: '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' (2008: 128). Many musicians desire to become a *chef* and play with power, like Mobutu did in his time, even to the extent of taking up his symbols. A strong illustration in White's ethnography is a video clip in which the face of Koffi Olomide, probably Congo's best known rumba musician, appears in the clouds, thus emulating the opening of television broadcasts during the Mobutu years, when spectators watched Mobutu's head floating in the clouds. This reappropriation of the symbols of postcolonial power is an example of strategic collaboration (*ibid.*: 232–4).

Joseph Trapido (2016) extends this discussion of the trickling down of elite power production in and through music; particularly insightful is his analysis of praise names that Congolese rumba musicians and their patrons/sponsors adopt. These

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are fed by powerful local and global regimes (e.g. Versace for the daughter of a musician, Kompressor for a Brussels-based female sponsor, or Sultani for the musician J. B. Mpiana, or artist names such as Bill Clinton and Saddam) and they should be understood, on the one hand, as a desire to mimic and thus obtain these powers, and, on the other, as actual demonstrations of these same powers (*ibid.*: 66).[10]

The 'postcolony' travels through Congolese popular culture to the diaspora. Many musicians' patrons and sponsors live in the diaspora and thus enlarge the territoriality of the Congolese postcolonial power regime. For performance arts, Sarah Arens (2018) analyses the monologue *Un Fou Noir dans le Pays des Blancs* (*A Black Fool in the Country of White Men*) by the Congolese Pie Tshibanda along Mbembe's lines of necropolitics and the grotesque. The show, which has been touring for years in Belgian (mainly francophone) theatres, and which has also been broadcast on Congolese TV stations, tackles military and ethnic violence during the Mobutu years, as well as migrant experiences in Belgium. This is a continuation of the Belgian colonizer's spatial politics and ethnic violence.

Jewsiewicki (1993) brilliantly illustrates how the performance of *commandement* was not limited to the world of dance music or theatre, but was also nimbly adopted by popular painters. Painters with clientele in the international community, such as Chéri Samba, have become *chefs* in their own right and borrow (or share) techniques of influence, impression and consolidation from (with) the political arena. And Ariel Osterweis Scott's (2010) study of Congolese dancer Faustin Linyekula's dance studio in Kisangani provides yet another example of scholars' desire to understand Congolese popular culture in relation to postcolonial state power. Linyekula lived in exile during the 1990s and learned ballet and other forms of dance in Kenya, France, Germany and the UK before returning to the DRC in 2001. After spending five years in Kinshasa, he moved to Kisangani, where he set up Studios Kabako in 2006. Linyekula asserts that dance forms express people's need to survive; as such, they are a kind of tactic. For Scott, Linyekula and his dancers provide 'dynamic counterweights to what Mbembe refers to as the 'aesthetics of vulgarity' and are an 'opposite to the ndombolo dance form that is intimately tied to the necropolitical power of the postcolonial state' (Scott 2010: 18).

The Sape culture, that other emblem of Zairian/Congolese popular culture, has been viewed through Mbembe's lens on postcolonial politics as well. Dominic Thomas understands *La Sape* as 'a sartorial desire for impression management' through designer clothes (2003: 957) with distinct political meanings. He quotes Mbembe at length on this:

> 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 ... 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. (Mbembe 2001: 131–3, quoted in Thomas 2003: 957)

In a similar vein to Linyekula's dance studio, Sape culture engages discursively and semiotically with dominant hegemonic norms and standards, thereby holding space

[10] (Rumba) dance in Mobutu's propaganda programme is discussed in the section on erotics.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for a counterhegemonic semiology. Thomas joins Didier Gondola, for whom *La Sape* conceals the postcolonial state's social failure, and 'transform[s] it into apparent victory' (Gondola 1999: 31, quoted in Thomas 2003: 958).[11]

Despite these fascinating accounts of Zairian/Congolese creativity in the contexts of different stages of postcolonial *commandement*, little comparative research has been undertaken between historical forms of popular culture in the Mobutu, Kabila Senior and Kabila Junior years. My own comparison of billboards depicting Joseph Kabila with political public photography from the Mobutu era (Pype 2011) provides a modest attempt to juxtapose different forms of visual language through various postcolonial periods. In contrast to the Mobutu regime, Joseph Kabila's propaganda did not capitalize on the image of the priapic tyrant or father; rather, it presented him as a builder, literally constructing the future of the nation through investments in material infrastructure, such as housing and airports. This difference can be explained as the result of the different relationships Kinois entertained with their rulers. In particular, during Joseph Kabila's reign, the cohabitation between ruler and citizens was fraught. Many Kinois did not perceive Joseph Kabila as Congolese, thus rendering it difficult for his PR office to present him as the father of Kinshasa's population.[12]

Another difference between Mobutu's and Kabila's forms of governance in Kinshasa was that, during Joseph Kabila's reign, the daily rituals of reification of the *commandement*'s power were relocated to on-screen engagements in public and even private television broadcasts. Even though public radio and television started in the late 1960s, Mobutu's *commandement* relied heavily on public festivals and meetings. During Joseph Kabila's reign, his entourage set up various new private TV stations that were fully embedded in the Kabila propaganda machine (Pype 2011). There were not that many physical meetings with President Kabila in the city: most interactions with the president occurred via public and private mass media.

Erotics in the postcolony

Erotics, seduction and sexual interaction run deep in Mbembe's analytics of the postcolony: 'political struggles in the postcolony are nearly always fought in the guise of sexual struggles, and vice versa' (Mbembe 2006: 168). Yet, there is a strong gender division in Mbembe's postcolony: his understanding of postcolonial political culture is phallocratic and is to a high degree defined as masculine and (hetero)sexual. There is no doubt that the *commandement* is male; the *tyran* is a father and a lover, and often a brute who seizes girls and women. The potestas' political strength is a synonym for his virility and seems to thrive on women's sexual availability. Furthermore, the whole system can only operate thanks to 'the unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure' (Mbembe 1992: 9). In a response to critics, Mbembe

[11] This contrasts with the relationship towards the state in neighbouring Congo-Brazzaville: *La Sape* generated considerable societal conflict in the Republic of the Congo because the *sapeurs*' ostentatious performances challenged official party ideology (Thomas 2003: 958). Yet, this may have changed over time. According to one reviewer, *sapeurs* consult the current president of the Republic of the Congo, Dennis Sassou Nguesso, for clothing advice.

[12] Despite the fact that many Kinois considered Joseph Kabila to be a stranger, they played with the 'father–child' idiom in political discourse when complaining about bad leadership and trying to improve their lifeworld (Pype 2011).

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(2006: 168) acknowledged that women can be leaders; in that case, '[f]or those holding power as much as for common men and women, it is always a question of maximizing on each occasion their virile or, as the case may be, feminine assets'. Nevertheless, the postcolony is markedly a space of sexual violence and exploitation, disregarding the gender of *commandement*. Postcolonial power is phallocratic power insofar that pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, and sexual rights over subordinates and the keeping of concubines are constitutive of postcolonial *commandement*. The postcolony thus is populated by postcolonial bureaucrats who manifest a 'desire for sexual pleasure' (*ibid*.), a concern to reproduce, and an overabundant life of the flesh. This economy of pleasure leads to transgressive moments of 'bureaucrats harassing students at school exits, honking car horns behind schoolgirls walking down the street' (*ibid*.).

While Mbembe mentions in passing the Marquis de Sade (a French author of the eighteenth century known for writing about libertine sexuality), thus evoking the combination of pain and pleasure, or cruelty, dominance, greed and lust, one cannot see the bureaucrat as a rapist. Rather, the sexual domination of the autocrat and his lower-raking avatars thrive on play, flattery, attraction and mutual seduction. The bureaucrat's power depends to a large extent on the public performance of being a virile man, of seducing and being able to enjoy and offer sexual pleasure.

One of the points of contention in Congo scholarship is Mbembe's argument that this postcolonial sexuality is unrelated to a precolonial sense of hospitality in which male guests were not supposed to sleep alone. Mbembe posits a difference between eroticism and hospitality in the precolonial era and brute, immoral sexual exploitation and aggression in the colonial and postcolonial period, arguing that 'the economy of pleasure has become inseparable from vice' (1992: 24). This perspective can be critiqued for being gendered and rather romanticizing. And, we need to ask, how did women and girls experience, initiate and make meaning of erotic encounters with guests?

Attention needs to be paid to the agency of the women (and/or men) who are the object of these instances of seduction, and who participate in an exchange of pleasure (and gifts). Furthermore, women were not always able to refuse the sexual advances of postcolonial authorities; very often they felt coerced to engage in sexual play, as the ethnography by Covington-Ward (2015) in western Congo has shown. Additional questions then pop up, for example regarding the definition of 'seduction' and, maybe more importantly, of 'pleasure' in the postcolony. Who can experience 'pleasure' in the postcolony? Can we distinguish between various forms of 'postcolonial pleasure'? Is 'postcolonial pleasure' possible without exploitation? And, ultimately, to what extent can the seduced also exploit the *commander*?

Such social and phenomenological questions seem to have been embryonically present in Mbembe's own understanding of the *commander*'s possibility for pleasure. Furthermore, Mbembe opened a window on the *commander*'s deeper psychological instability when he defined the postcolony as 'a world of *anxious* virility' (Mbembe 1992: 9, emphasis added). So far, this latter point about the *commandement*'s weakness has hardly inspired deeper research. Hendriks' (2022) ethnography of the complex relationships among expats, local political and social institutions, and Congolese workers in a logging concession in northern Congo is an exception. He describes how the weakness of the Congolese state – and of the logging concession itself, for that matter – provides various openings for power plays.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rape in the postcolony

Mbembe's emphasis on the economy of pleasure may have prevented scholars from situating and reading the hypersexual *commander* in the war-ridden communities of eastern Congo as a prototype for the raping (rebel) soldier. Charlotte Mertens and Maree Pardy (2017) use *On the Postcolony* to dissect a *longue durée* trend in the contemporary trope of 'rape as a weapon of war in eastern Congo', which is nothing less than a continuation of the politics of othering so prevalent in colonial culture. They do not use Mbembe's analysis of (post)colonial governance, but rather work with his notion of 'languages of life', 'a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images and fictions that because they are available to individuals' imagination and intelligence [are] actually experienced' (Mertens and Pardy 2017: 958). Nowadays, the whole rhetoric of 'rape as a weapon of war' has become the dominant framework through which to interpret the sexualization of violence in eastern Congo. Yet, the narrative of Congolese women being victims of raping kin, neighbours, state agents and others perpetuates the dehumanizing discourse of colonial subjectivity (Mertens 2018). Then and now, the Congolese man is portrayed as a beast rather than as a human being. Such a representation of Congolese masculinity obviously overlaps with the exploitative character of the virile *potentat*, but cannot be reduced to it. The critical scholarship on sexuality and war points to a dangerous politics of representation of Congolese men in contexts of war and conflict, where the theory of 'the postcolony' would fail to do justice to the psychology and economy of the conflict. This body of scholarship clearly avoids the traps of this image of the pleasure-seeking *commander* and correctly critiques the all too easy stereotyping of Congolese army/rebel soldiers.

A second point made by Mertens (2018), though unfortunately hidden in a footnote, is that local elites or actors on the ground also appropriate such international discourses. Joining Douma and Hilhorst (2012) and Eriksson-Baaz and Stern (2013), Mertens observed 'how Congolese staff as well as ordinary civilians, for a range of complex and social reasons, recycled/mimicked rhetoric on sexual violence as a weapon of war. Often, reliance on international funding leaves Congolese NGOs with little choice other than to make their language compatible with donors' priorities' (Mertens 2018: 8, footnote 14). In such global politics, the humanitarian West takes on a masculine posture of saving and protecting Congolese women. Yet, this image of a gracious, favourable and caring, even safeguarding, (foreign) leader, seemingly far removed from Mbembe's seductive *potentat*, is exploitative and manipulative.[13]

Eriksson-Baaz told me that she finds it very difficult to use this colonial trope of 'the white man saving colonized women from the abusive colonized male subject' when trying to make sense of the gendered violence in eastern Congo.[14] For her, it contains three pitfalls: it is too simplistic because of its reproduction of racist stereotypes of black men as fundamentally other (oppressors, brutal, oversexualized, misogynist, etc.); it fails to attribute any agency to women; and, finally, it exoticizes sexual violence in the DRC as fundamentally different from other forms of sexual aggression and abuse, an argument Hunt (2008) made very convincingly more than a decade ago as well.

[13] In recent years, international agencies have published information about aid workers sexually abusing Congolese citizens (e.g. research by the New Humanitarian and Thomas Reuters Foundation in 2020).

[14] Email conversation, July 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Citoyennes *(female citizens) and homo-erotics*

Bringing our attention back to the influence of the sexualized autocrat on Congo studies, I found spaces and technologies of flirtation, seduction and joy as key in the *commandement*'s mode of governance. This becomes particularly clear in the study of urban music and dance (Covington-Ward 2015). Covington-Ward's intricate ethnography of *Gesture and Power* (*ibid*.) in the province of Central Kongo (previously called the province of Lower Congo) explicitly focuses on gender relations from a female perspective, as these unfolded within the coerced dancing of *animation politique* groups, among other spaces, during Mobutu's heyday. *Gesture and Power* is among the rare texts that build 'on the banality of power by examining the experiences of women in their engagement with a coercive state' (*ibid*.: 33–4). The ethnography convincingly demonstrates how Mobutu's *authenticité* programme and the construction of a hypermasculine state led to a form of gendered nationalism 'that differed from the experiences of male performers' (*ibid*.: 34). Here, Covington-Ward writes about male dancers who engaged in Mobutu's *animation politique*, but we can also expect that male political actors had a different understanding of gendered relationships in national politics. She rightfully calls for 'further analysis in existing discussions of gendered citizenship of the varied ways the bodies of male and female citizens are used to further nationalist aims' (*ibid*.: 167).

Performing in the *animation politique* clubs was the main way of expressing and enacting loyalty and support for Mobutu's government; although, as Covington-Ward does not hesitate to point out, the bedroom was another site of potential sexual exploitation of the female members of the *animation politique* groups. Indeed, sexual intercourse with political actors such as the president, or other powerful men, was yet another required performance manifesting gendered embodied citizenship. Some women benefited more than others from their participation as performers in local animation groups (Covington-Ward 2015: 171). Others saw their participation negatively impacting their lives. For the latter, animation was indeed a disruptive force in their lives: 'they had to stop whatever work they were doing and heed the call to dance in faraway parts of the territory' (*ibid*.). This required significant personal economic investment as well. Covington-Ward thus presents various perspectives on the benefits and detriments of animation in the lives of Zairian women, and nuances the various forms of commitment to and engagement with the *animation politique*. These observations shatter the idea of a *commandement* ruling over a homogeneous group of subjects; they push us to rethink 'conviviality' and 'cohabitation' not only in subject–state relations in postcolonial Africa, but also in the ways in which this plays out differently among subjects and among the different genders.

Mbembe's postcolonial state depends to a large extent on heterosexual encounters, and thus ignores the role of same-sex practices in power acquisition and consolidation. This was adjusted in his 2006 response to critics, where he signalled the political importance of same-sex relations in Cameroon. In Kabila's Congo, this was certainly a reality. In my own research on Kinois sociality and power during the Kabila era, rumours about homosexuality abounded (and they continue to do so): gaining access to international corporations, such as telephone companies, would depend on men's willingness to sleep with other men. Other forms of economic success and prestige were also said to rely on men's sexual availability to other men,

often mediated by Rosicrucians and Freemasons (Pype 2017: 127). So, in the imagination of Joseph Kabila's subjects, access to global capitalist worlds seemed to depend on homosexual practices.

In order to make sense of such discourses, we should not forget that rumours gain their political power in societies where 'real power' is hidden. In Zaire and the DRC, citizens are convinced that power is obtained and exercised in occult worlds. It is no surprise that Mbembe (2006: 167) writes: 'In most instances, the anal is akin to the nocturnal.' It seems that we need a historical investigation of the entanglements of anus, fetish and charisma, as called for by Butler (1992), and as currently developed by Hendriks (2022).

Finally, some Congo scholars seem to ignore or even censor the importance of sexuality on postcolonial politics. In *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa*, Michael Schatzberg devotes a chapter to the representation of power, and almost diffidently – 'although I do not dwell on it' (2001: 49) – mentions the relationship between sexual activity and power. Schatzberg writes in passing that 'it cannot be entirely accidental that some African politicians find it expedient to identify themselves in one way or another with the power and sexual potency of a rooster' (*ibid.*: 49); only in a footnote does he refer to 'the stimulating work of Achille Mbembe' (the article 'Provisional notes') 'on the Rabelaisian aspects of political life'. Schatzberg's prime example is the 'quasi-official translation' of the new official name of Mobutu, adopted in 1972. The dramatic sounding 'Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa za Banga' was commonly interpreted as 'the all-conquering warrior who triumphs over all obstacles', although 'many ordinary citizens preferred a different translation "the cock who leaves no hen intact"' (*ibid.*: 49). One can almost read the chuckling between the lines, suggesting a kind of embarrassment to engage with the topic.

This brief overview of the erotics in and of the postcolony illuminates how Mbembe's figure of the sexual *commander* has provided a fruitful lens to better understand the intimate and intricate workings of postcolonial political power, in the body and the bed of Zairian/Congolese citizens. Bodily pleasure and excitement, but also sexual violence and exploitation, have been at the heart of Congo's postcolony.

Concluding thoughts: writing about the postcolony

This final section engages with three observations regarding Mbembe in Congo studies: its relative absence in the study of religion in the DRC, despite being a major field in Congo scholarship; questions about academic representation and ethical concerns; and, finally, the necessity of historicizing the postcolony.

Religion as politics

While Mbembe's engagement with religion (the fetish) merits attention in its own right, it appears that the study of religion in the DRC has engaged with Mbembe's '(Provisional notes) on the postcolony' in only a limited way. This is most probably because understanding religion in a 'postcolonial' sense risks reducing religious expression to political acts. Anthropologist René Devisch references briefly, and in brackets, the journal article 'Provisional notes' to sketch out a context for the surge of independent Christian churches in Kinshasa. By the late 1980s, Mobutu's power had

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

waned, and Zairian citizens turned against the state (through acts of pillage and mass rioting in the early 1990s), while charismatic churches were 'moderating the hedonist expectations and redirecting the consumerist ideals of their followers, and served to control the often violent responses to disappointment' (Devisch 1996: 570).

De Boeck (2005) has read Kinshasa's religious landscape more explicitly through a Mbembian lens. Approaching Kinshasa from the mid-1990s, De Boeck (*ibid.*) diagnoses the first post-Mobutu decade as an 'apocalyptic interlude', thus capturing the religious language and mood that prevailed in the public domain. By framing the situation as 'apocalyptic', Pentecostal pastors could easily make sense of Mobutu's excessive style of governance, including the atrocities, intimidation, sexuality and extraction. De Boeck is particularly inspired by Mbembe's chapter 'The thing and its doubles' in the monograph *On the Postcolony* to make sense of narratives about *kindoki* (witchcraft and sorcery), vampires, nocturnal journeys and feasts. In such stories, relatives and neighbours are said to have been sacrificed or eaten by intimate others. These echo narratives that circulated about Mobutu and his agents and that were also told about Joseph Kabila and his proxies. Such stories literally depicted and depict citizens and power holders as inhabiting a shared *occult* universe.

In the book *Kinshasa: tales of the invisible city* (2005), De Boeck and Plissart deploy religious language even further. The authors agree with Mbembe's understanding of the relationship between state and society in the postcolony as 'zombification'. They write about 'high postcolonialism', which 'creat[es] a general atmosphere of connivance, familiarity and interchangeableness between the living and the dead' (*ibid.*: 127).

Academic representation

In his already mentioned ethnography of rumba music and popular politics during the Mobutu era, Bob White (2008: 288) formulated some ethical concerns on the level of scholarly representation. In particular, he asks: 'How can we write about the relationship between politics and popular culture without a narrative that ends up blaming the victim?' This question illuminates the ethical difficulties that arise when taking seriously cohabitation, or 'the largely shared symbolic order' (Mbembe 2006: 159). After all, both *commandement* and citizens/subjects partake in this shared symbolic order; and it is governed by a shared desire to accumulate wealth and power, as well as a search for pleasure and enjoyment.

Most difficult for some scholars to acknowledge perhaps is that Mbembe leaves room for subjects' (citizens') own engagement with the absurdity of postcolonial power within an intimate relationship with those in power. I encountered this difficulty when I shared drafts of a paper about a television news reporting show, *JT Lingala Facile (JTLF)* (Pype 2011). This TV news programme was launched by Joseph Kabila. Spectators called in to the news programme asking for various topics of quotidian urban hardship to be covered, hoping that a television report might lead to a solution. In these broadcasts, the citizens and journalists directly addressed the president, and his entourage and state functionaries, reminding them of their obligations as 'fathers' towards their 'children'. Some colleagues whose feedback I had solicited insisted that the news programme should be read as a form of propaganda, and they could not agree with my understanding of viewers' participation in the show as a form of agency. My colleagues' reading, however, does not acknowledge the

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relationships that undergird television news, and it reduces the spectators (who actively contribute to the news programme by proposing topics and even providing footage) to victims lacking agency. *JTLF* news broadcast mediates between the leadership and the citizens, or 'children', forcing them to literally attend to one another. With hindsight, I think that the main issue was that my analysis, focusing on entanglements and reciprocity, does not align with human rights or democratic orientations, and this may unsettle some critics of Kabila's regime. Yet, it may be helpful to understand Mbembe's theory of citizen–state entanglements through what Tim Ingold (2017) has called 'correspondence' and the practice of 'moving along'. While Ingold proposes an alternative take on human and non-human relationships, I think that this is exactly how Mbembe understands citizen–state entanglements: both parties correspond and react to each other. Postcolonial political entanglements lead to constant interactions, reactions and reconsiderations from all participants.

Rethinking the postcolony as a Mobutist regime?

In the article addressed to his critics (2006: 150), Mbembe remarks that the postcolony is a 'form' and a 'figure', a 'figure of a fact'. The *truth*, or the underlying grammar of postcolonial political worlds, is 'brutality, with its various forms, shapes, markings, composite faces, fundamental rhythms, and ornamentations' (*ibid*.). Mbembe references African sculpture to point to the potency of images of brutality: 'In the spirit of African sculpture, figuration itself has to do with the terrifying, cathartic and therapeutic potential of images – in this case, the images of power and power as a form of imagination.' Congo scholars have much to contribute to a historicization and refinement of this form and figure. After all, the scholarly works discussed above hardly challenge the fundamental proposition of Mbembe's work: that the postcolony remains very much indebted to colonial regimes of power, subjection and extraction.

A few scholars have taken issue with 'the postcolonial' character of Congolese politics and society in the last three decades. The political scientist Crawford Young (2004: 24), for example, challenges us, stating that 'maybe the "post-colonial state" ended in the 1990s', and questions 'whether "post-colonial" remains a serviceable designation' (*ibid*.). He contends that little remains of the hegemonic apparatus that African leaders inherited. He concedes that, in 'high Mobutist post-colonial times', the *Bula Matari* (crusher of rocks) as a personification of the colonial period remained relevant for characterizing the harsh, unforgiving, dictatorial and violent nature of the Mobutu state. However, as Young argues, 'the shriveled, disheveled and fragmented superstructure of Congo's governance in the Kabila age bears only a remote resemblance to its predecessors' (*ibid*.).

Young's reflection can be critiqued for overemphasizing the impact of colonialism, and for not taking into account the various indigenous forms of governance and rule that co-shaped the colonial state.[15] Yet, what is compelling about Young's critique is that he calls for a historicization of *postcolonial commandement*. He seems to be on a par with Tshikala K. Biaya's observation that the episteme of the *commandement* partly disappeared with the end of Mobutu's dictatorship (2000: 31). Biaya speaks about

[15] For a similar critique on the study of security and the army in sub-Saharan Africa, see Verweijen and Eriksson-Baaz (2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ruptures in the lifeworlds of youth in the postcolony, and claims that a new episteme emerged, one in which postcolonial urban youth, in particular the *shegues* (street children), dominate.

Attention to the historicity of Mbembe's analysis is indeed pertinent, and I have hinted at it at various moments in this article. We should not be oblivious to the fact that 'Provisional notes' appeared in 1992, while the English translation of *De la Postcolonie* came out in 2001 – as *On the Postcolony*. During that decade, domestic politics were overhauled: as Biaya (2000) reminds us, the end of the Mobutu regime meant the disappearance of the single political party, with its work and service programmes; Mobutu's ideology had also structured fashion, accommodation and even language. All of these had to be reinvented in the post-Mobutu era. In addition, structural adjustment programmes reshaped politics, media and services. By 1997, a new leader appeared, Laurent Kabila, who would be in power only until his assassination in 2001. Laurent Kabila's political programme never could fully take off, yet it seemed to announce a new hybrid style of governance with a strong state in certain parts of the country.

As postcolonial leaders reinvent themselves, and citizens find new ways of imagining their rights and obligations vis-à-vis social and political others, new postcolonial forms emerge. To further riff on Mbembe's own gesture of comparison: African sculpture now depicts other figurations, reflecting new configurations of power, control, value and influence. It might be timely to move our attention to the elaboration of artistic figuring in order to understand the new, emerging forms of power that operate in the contemporary moment, which we could call 'the Postcolony 2.0', characterized by a predominance of digital politics, Chinese economic projects, and intensified relationships between 'communities at home' and those in the diaspora. All these developments draw on colonial relations while also reshaping them within other circuits of power and affect.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Thomas Hendriks, Maria Eriksson-Baaz and Wale Adebanwi for their feedback on a draft of this article, as well as the three reviewers. Isabelle de Rezende has been helpful with language editing.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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Cite this article: Pype, K. (2022). '"Provisional notes on the postcolony" in Congo studies: an overview of themes and debates'. *Africa* **92**, 49–70. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000863