

The Politics of Time

IMAGINING
AFRICAN BECOMINGS

EDITED BY ACHILLE MBEMBE
AND FELWINE SARR




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The Politics of Time

Imagining African Becomings

Edited by Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr
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Preface

Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr

This book represents a sequel to and continuation of its preceding volume, *To Write the Africa World*. Authored by many, it is the product of The Ateliers of Thought in Dakar, an autonomous, collaborative platform for intellectual and artistic work that was established in 2016 for the purpose of investigating the present and future of our world from the vantage point of Africa, and of contributing through these efforts to the renovation of critical thought in the contemporary context.

New voyages of thought are being charted across the globe. The routes they take today are not necessarily those of yesterday, when everything routinely passed through Europe. In the Global South, new and original voices are rising up and, with boldly new terms and categories, taking on the challenge of thinking our shared earth. Moreover, although its indicators may have yet to adequately distinguish themselves from the daily noise, a new certainty is slowly but surely imposing itself. Africa is not merely the place where part of the planet's future is currently playing itself out. Africa is one of the great laboratories from which unprecedented forms of today's social, economic, political, cultural, and artistic life are emerging.

Often, these new forms of life, thought, and the social come to light in unexpected places. Brought forward by actors who are neither highly visible nor very well known, these forms become concrete in assemblages that draw deeply from the long memory of societies even as they assume strikingly contemporary, indeed futuristic, guises. This

polymorphic creativity and the velocity that comes with it cast serious doubt upon bodies of knowledge passed down from the distant and not-so-distant past, at times cruelly exposing their limits. The new forms call for an unprecedented renovation of paradigms and methods, of analytical tools, vocabulary, and discourses – in short, they call for the creation of new languages and bodies of knowledge with the power to mobilize the archives of the Whole-World [*Tout-Monde*] to provide new intelligibility for the various upheavals in process.

In this book, the authors weigh in on one of the upheavals in process, the upheaval of time [*temps*] in the plural – which is to say, that of multiple times [*des temps*] and their entanglement. For it is not only a question of acceleration and runaway systems, but also of times moving at multiple speeds, of times composed of different momentums, continuities, ruptures, to say nothing of different regressions, dispersions, and bifurcations. In short, at least when one looks from Africa, all one sees are *times in migration* [*temps en migration*].

To describe this *concatenation of times*, the contributors to the present volume have practiced a kind of writing that is itself in movement – even in transit – and that mixes a diverse set of vocabularies. They draw eclectically from works of literature, philosophy, history, geography, art, economics, sociology, pedagogy, and poetry to weave together their problematics, to stretch them further, to translate them and to transpose them. The book has been deliberately composed in several genres, and the reader is invited to move freely between them. Taken together, the different contributions not only express a form of reasoning at once malleable and metamorphic; they trace the lineaments of a common concern – namely, how to envision a *politics of time* in contemporary conditions.

But what do we mean by “politics of time”? On a planetary scale, we are witnessing the emergence and crystallization of a new cycle in the redistribution of power, resources, and value. Another partition of the world is being charted at the same time as other *geo-graphies* [*géo-graphies*] of the Earth are being traced. If this cycle awakens hope in expanded possibilities of life and action for many human groups, it is no less the case that, more or less everywhere, it produces collisions, promotes an unequal redistribution of vulnerability, and provokes new and ruinous compromises with forms of violence belonging at once to the future and to the archaic past.

More than ever, the world is dominated by the specter of its own end and by the fear of obliteration and extinction. With the collapse of grand hopes for transformation, the idea of a happy ending was thrown out, opening the door to a proliferation of cynical fictions, beliefs, and multiple forms of bewitchment. Two forms of disenchanting thinking dominate our era. The first – apocalyptic thinking – invites us to contemplate the coming collapse and to plan for the end. It is concerned with how we will finally come down to earth. The other applies itself to the task of rethinking utopia and the future in the language of technological messianism. Human redemption, so goes the claim, will paradoxically be achieved through technological escalation.

The contributions assembled in this volume distance themselves from these thematics of closure and vertigo. They ask whether one can, by taking Africa as a point of departure, seize hold of any options on the future. In other words, is it possible to politicize time beyond the alternatives of apocalypse and technolâtry [*technolâtrie*]? If so, then how, in what terms, and to what end? Are there different possibilities for inhabiting Africa – and, beyond Africa, the world?

This is no simple task, since in one kind of narrative Africa has long been expelled from the time of history. This is certainly the reason why the greatest part of African thought has devoted so much energy to repoliticizing time. In this context, repoliticizing time has consisted in recovering the traces and reconstructing the memory of the past, not only as proof of historicity but also as a labor on oneself, with the hope that this work of rehabilitation would in the end permit the formation of other ties with oneself and with the world. Repoliticizing time has long consisted in the attempt to seize the past as a transformative force. Creatively reinterpreted and retranslated, such a force was thought capable of opening up new spaces of possibility. It could spark a movement that would carry Africa out of the waiting room of history where the continent's external masters thought they had confined it. Under such conditions, time would no longer be experienced as an uninterrupted succession of ruptures, constraints, and impossibilities. By reconnecting with the transformative kernel of its past, Africa could at last return to being a power - which is to say, something that contains its own capacity within itself.

The contemporaneity of multiple worlds and of different historical depths has always been a feature of African societies. This volume is no longer concerned with refuting the theses, now old and anachronistic, that history is immobile, or stalled, or waiting to begin.

How might one transform the present and the past into a future? How might one produce a bifurcation in the real? Imagine other African possibilities? Invent ways for passing from the potential to its multiple actualizations? These, we suspect, have been the questions at the heart of the modern study of Africa and its diasporas. How, therefore, can one envision a politics of the future, if not, as a number of contributions to this volume suggest, by reopening a

space for the unpredictable and the possibility of an infinity of becomings? It is most certainly not a question of liquidating the past, but rather of attaining that juncture where different times meet, the precise point of their entanglement, of seeking out new ways to inhabit the world and new chains of relations. The time for refutation is over. It is now time for conditional affirmation – that is, for the exploration of other possibilities for a future yet to be written, a future with neither promise nor guarantee, an emergent future rich in possibilities and charged with life. It is this emergence that the present volume heralds.

Part I

From Thinking Identity to Thinking African Becomings

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

Souleymane Bachir Diagne is Professor of Philosophy and of Francophone Studies at Columbia University in New York. His recent works include: Bergson postcolonial: l'élan vital dans la pensée de Léopold Sédar Senghor et Mohamed Iqbal (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2011); L'encre des savants: réflexions sur la philosophie en Afrique (Paris: Présence africaine & CODESRIA, 2013); Comment philosopher en islam (Paris: Philippe Rey / Jimsaan, 2014); Philosopher en islam et en christianisme (with Philippe Capelle-Dumont) (Paris: Cerf, 2016); En quête d'Afrique(s): universalisme et pensée décoloniale (with Jean-Loup Amselle) (Paris: Albin Michel, 2018); and La controverse (with Rémi Braque) (Paris: Stock, 2019).

[W]hat matters is not philosophy as such but critical thought. It is such thinking that we must develop today ..., to imagine the possible beyond the real, to make sure that the platitudes of the present do not become the measure of all things but are themselves measured, relativized, put in their proper place, ranked in order and made subordinate to other demands, that they are weighed against norms that push us forward and that free us from conformism and resignation.

Paulin Hountondji¹

Africa is, like all the other continents, multiple, diverse; there one thinks a thousand different things in more than a thousand different languages. Were one, nonetheless, to attempt to sum up in a single word (an impossible task, to

be sure) contemporary African thought – as it is presented in the works of authors as different from one another as Paulin Hountondji of Benin; Felwine Sarr, Animata Diaw-Cissé, or Ramatoulaye Diagne of Senegal; Achille Mbembe of Cameroon; Tanella Boni of the Ivory Coast; Kwasi Wiredu or Kwame Appiah of Ghana; Charles Bowao or Abel Kouvouama of the Congo; Abdou Filali-Ansary of Morocco ... – one could argue that African thought has passed from yesterday's thinking of identity, which was part of the struggle against colonialism, to today's thinking of becomings. What will happen to African existence in its various iterations, and to its weight in a world grown finite, confined by financial, economic, human, electronic, and cultural flows – that is, by the different facets of globalization? What is happening and what will happen to the weight – or, rather, to the value – of what we are, to our ways of being in the world, to these African faces bearing witness to the human adventure? Such questions were already part of the response to colonial negation. At the time, the answers provided were, among others, negritude, the African personality, the Arab renaissance – in other words, incarnations of political and cultural nationalism, expressions of identity that we had hoped would all one day converge upon the realization of a Pan-African ideal. *Today*, where do these responses and that ideal stand? Put differently – what are the responses *today*? What are they in a world no longer structured by an opposition to Africa's negation – even though that negation sometimes re-emerges in comments, seemingly of another time, by politicians from former colonial powers who come out saying that Africans have yet to fully enter history, or that colonization represented nothing but the desire to share the metropole's culture. I will consider here the movement whereby the meaning of African existence and “presence” ceases to denote the resistance, defense, and illustration of an identity and turns into a question of pluralism and

becomings. It will be argued that we have moved from the reactive, mass Africanity [*africanité*] that was the appropriate response to colonial negation toward a system of thought adapted to a situation that obliges Africanity to understand itself as open and diverse and to attend to the problem of cultural and religious pluralism – a problem whose urgency is indicated by the tragedies that Africa is once more experiencing today, at the very moment that it plainly represents the continent of the future.

For this reason, I trust one will excuse me for occasionally speaking in the first person plural (for saying “we”) and for at times being prescriptive (for saying “we must”): I do so because, when it comes to this movement of thinking becomings, I am one of the interested parties.

Against Negation: Saying Who and What We Are

Who and what are we?

Admirable question.

Aimé Césaire²

In the immediate postwar period, in 1947, Alioune Diop, a Senegalese intellectual, founded a journal with the title *Présence africaine* in Paris, at the heart of the Latin Quarter. “*Présence africaine*” was also the name of the publishing house that followed shortly after the creation of the journal. The very site that became – and today still is – the location of *Présence africaine*, 25 bis rue des Écoles, was a symbol in and of itself. A presence of Africa had affirmed itself alongside the temples that one of its colonizers had dedicated to Knowledge: next to the Sorbonne, a stone’s throw away from the École polytechnique on the rue de la Montagne-Sainte-Genève,

not far from the École normale supérieure on the rue d'Ulm. A little farther away, at Les Deux Magots and the Café de Flore by Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the intellectual history of the postwar period was also being written. In this environment, *Présence* became a meeting place for intellectuals, writers, and students coming from Africa or living in diaspora, as well as for progressive French intellectuals. The mission that *Présence* had given itself was the production of knowledge: knowledge of Africa, knowledge of oneself through Africa, knowledge for Africans ...

Independence was in the air. The year 1947 was when India and Pakistan acquired sovereignty. The 1948 publication of the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* by Senghor, with Jean-Paul Sartre's preface, *Black Orpheus* [*Orphée noir*], an existentialist celebration of the power of human emancipation wielded by Africa, was one of *Présence*'s two major achievements at the hour of its birth. The other was the publication of *Bantu Philosophy* [*La philosophie bantou*] by the Franciscan friar Placide Tempels. For the first time, Tempels's book associated African culture with what was taken to be the quintessence and very spirit of European civilization – that which set it apart from the rest of humanity: philosophy. Indeed, as Husserl had declared not too long before, in 1933,³ it was on account of this spirit that India would do well to Europeanize as much as possible; whereas a Europe that had attained full self-consciousness and a perfect understanding of its own *telos* would know that it had no reason to Indianize itself [*s'indianiser*] in any way whatsoever.

Ten years later, in 1957, *Présence* published *Nations nègres et cultures* [translated in abridged form as *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*], the work in which Cheikh Anta Diop made the case for an African

presence at the origins of human civilizations. In the field of history, the publication of Diop's book marked a crucial date and an essential contribution to the project of deconstructing the Hegelian pretense that the History of Spirit was a *telos* which belonged to a particular form of humanity. In the same year, 1957, Ghana acquired independence, an independence that its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, understood as a simple step in the greater march toward the organic unity of a free Africa, the *sine qua non* for the affirmation of an African presence in the world. Behind this march, behind the self-affirmation that was both its condition and its objective, Nkrumah discerned a philosophy based on the consciousness of a unity that waited to be forged, of a reconstructed identity to be realized as a "new harmony" - one which would see Africanity integrate Christian and Islamic interpretations into itself not as disruptions but as contributions: consciencism [*consciencisme*] was thus expected to illuminate the forward march of the continent.

Africa is not only the Sub-Saharan region of the continent - what Hegel thought he could call "Africa proper." In its northern regions, the discourse had also been - in a manner analogous to what we have just seen - one of the *nahda*, the *re-birth* (in Arabic) that was meant to answer the colonial negation and whose claims were an essential component of the identitarian discourse of African Arabness. In one guise or another, the external shock of Europe's colonization of the Arab world had prompted a question that one could formulate in the following way: what has happened to our identity so that now, in our current condition under European domination, we observe our former greatness reduced to nothing? Posed in this manner, the question implied a return to what had constituted that greatness: Islam. As a consequence, being reborn to oneself, to one's own identity, meant returning to

the fundamental principles of a golden age. It follows that every rebirth, in this sense, is a fundamentalism. This return to the foundation, this re-founding of the self, however, still needed to be defined. It could mean for Islam to once again take up the spirit of movement that coincides with its very culture, which has always been anxious to break with the servile imitation of tradition (*taqlîd*) and which is based on the right - in truth, the obligation - not to blindly "do what our fathers did": the right not to reproduce the tradition that, as Samir Amin correctly maintains, might itself constitute a definition of modernity. But "going back" could also mean putting forward what was, or what is thought to be, the "original purity" of a foundation that has been recast as the objective. In this case, the insistence is placed on the reconstitution of a model - human history being nothing more than an effort to hold on to the sacred model, to what Henry Corbin calls a hiero-history [*hiéro-histoire*] forever closed on itself. In this instance, the refoundation would be *Salafism* - which is to say, a return to the ways of acting and perceiving that were practiced by the "pious ancestors" (*salâf as sâlihîn*).

The discourse of identity always oscillates between these two ways of understanding what it means to re-found the self - the two interpretations, incidentally, not being necessarily antithetical. Those who think that fidelity consists not in the imitation of a fossilized model but rather in the continual movement of self-invention and of one's own modernity may well call themselves the true heirs of the *Salâf* (after all, if the Salafist reading of Islam took aim at the Sufism that was so important to Islam in Africa, the Sufis, for their part, regard themselves as the genuine continuation of what was once the first community of believers). It was thus in the name of the genuine spirit of Islam that, long ago, Al-Afghani admonished Muslim scholars for ignoring the demands of modernity, and that,

in the same terms, his Egyptian disciple Mohammad Abduh, who powerfully influenced Arab nationalism and reformism in the twentieth century, recalled the importance of history as progress and not as the waning of identity away from a perfect model. For that is the crux of the question: how is one to think identity in time? Is it necessary to consider time as the enemy of being? Or should one heed the fact that time constitutes the very texture of identity in the prophetic saying “do not vilify time, for time is God”?

The Question of Becomings: Thinking and Living Pluralism

Where do we stand today with the infinite task of affirming the presence of Africa in the world? What is to be done in today’s conditions?

A genuinely multicultural world that would counter Eurocentrism and its new avatars still awaits construction. Today, the principal form of Eurocentrism is not one culture’s assertion that its values can dictate the norms that all others must follow. It is, rather, the form that grants the West the exorbitant privilege of being the only culture capable of reflecting critically on itself. In other words, today’s Eurocentrism is no longer one of values but of the question – recognizably Nietzschean – of the value of values: a question, it is said, that in its true, authentic sense can only be posed in “the West.” Thus, where other civilizations are by nature condemned to cling to their visions of the world to the point of fanaticism – *adhering* like “oysters,” to use Valéry’s expression⁴ – Western civilization is taken to be the only civilization capable of maintaining a critical distance with respect to what is held to be the norm. In response to this form of Eurocentrism,

let it be said that, when it comes to genuine culture – that is, culture expressing the humanity of man [*de l’homme*] – there is no such thing as zero aptitude for self-criticism. To claim otherwise would mean relinquishing all hope in the possibility of an encounter between cultures.⁵

Now, the African situation today calls for critical thought more than it ever has before. This is the meaning of the call Paulin Hountondji issues in his response to the philosophical questionnaire created by the philosopher Lansana Keïta, and which I chose as the epigraph for the present reflection:

It is such [critical] thinking that we must develop today ..., to imagine the possible beyond the real, to make sure that the platitudes of the present do not become the measure of all things but are themselves measured, relativized, put in their proper place, ranked in order and made subordinate to other demands, that they are weighed against norms that push us forward and that free us from conformism and resignation.⁶

Making sure that the possible marches in advance of the real, illuminates it, and draws it forward, is the task that awaits us today. The project we have called “*Présence africaine*” must now confront the crisis of meaning [*une crise du sens*] produced by three decades of exponentially growing poverty on the continent. Even if it is undeniable today that the seeds of change are real, and there are reasons for thinking that Africa is a continent with which one will have to reckon now and in the future, the rates of growth that indicate progress have been slow to translate into jobs. This manifests itself in the distress of African youth who, more anxious about what will happen than about identity, picture their future in an elsewhere of emigration. The daily drama of the waves closing over young Africans who have drowned in the Straits of

Gibraltar is a constant reminder of how imperative it now is to subordinate identity to becoming, to think of meaning in the present as a projection coming from the future and not from the past.⁷ For the fate of African identity in the world depends above all on Africa's disoriented youth, who rock back and forth between two aspects of a single anxiety: demobilizing skepticism and a range of fanaticisms.

In confronting the danger of deadly fanaticisms represented today by Boko Haram in the north of Nigeria or by the groups ravaging northern Mali, it is important to affirm pluralism, its virtues and its necessity, as a response to the challenges of the present and the future. Two urgent tasks stand before contemporary African thought: the reinvention of an African sense of religious pluralism, and the reinvention of an African sense of cultural pluralism.

Religious Pluralism

In the acceptance speech he gave in Stockholm for the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, Wole Soyinka took advantage of the spotlight and the attention the whole world directed upon him to recall an important and magnificent lesson that our continent has for humanity. This lesson provided a response to the philosopher Hegel, who, as part of a larger effort to cast African humanity out of the theatre of universal history, had written that, in this land cloaked "in the dark mantle of the night," monotheism's concept of a unique, transcendent God never came close to being formulated. The truth, Soyinka essentially argued in his Stockholm speech, was that Africa was not mired in the ignorance of monotheism, but that it was instead the land of pluralism. If the veneration of a supreme divinity existing beyond all intermediary, ancestral spirits constituted the religious identity of a given people, then it made no sense for this people to seek to convert

another people to itself. Thus, if it was natural for the monotheism that Hegel had in mind to invent, in the name of the uniqueness of the True God, the oxymoron of the “holy war,” Soyinka observed that such a notion was entirely foreign to African religious identity.

From a historical perspective, Soyinka may have been largely correct. But, if one considers the situation today and makes projections for tomorrow, it is clear that the reality of religious identities on the continent is that of Abrahamic monotheisms. The Christian and Muslim religions are spreading at greater speed in Africa than anywhere else, in a race that occasionally resembles a competition. As deplorable as it may be, the gods of the traditional religions have withdrawn from our world, and there is no use holding on to the romantic vision of an essentially, and therefore naturally, tolerant Africanity. One can only wish that the interreligious violence which we see - all too often, alas - take place, in Nigeria for example, would succeed in convincing us of one thing: for the twenty-first century that we are embarked upon, we must here and now reinvent an African sense of the multicultural, of ethnic and religious pluralism. Perhaps we will be able - as the filmmaker Sembène Ousmane was in film after film (for example, in his magnificent *Guelwaar*) - to go on thinking that a traditional, African spirit of tolerance has outlived the old, local religions, and that this spirit can assist in such a reinvention. Nonetheless, whatever the case may be, it is a fact that the reinvention will first take place in the dialogue between the multiple identities which today constitute - and tomorrow will continue to constitute - the religious and cultural landscape of our continent. The attention that a Pan-Africanist organization like CODESRIA devotes to these questions shows that the intellectuals of today's Africa have

made the urgent need to reinvent an African sense of religious pluralism part of their thinking.

Interfaith dialogue is the concern of the world as a whole, confronted with the cacophony of religious identities. Today, any worthwhile, future-oriented thinking about what societies and cultures faced with globalization are becoming must assign a central place to the renewed role of the religious as a force of identification – a force which, as such, should be able to contribute to stability and security, but which has also proven itself capable of engendering violence: religious identity, as one can confirm on our continent and elsewhere, is of all identities the easiest to mobilize and the readiest to plunge into deadly madness. Because it is particularly exposed, Africa has an essential role to play in the promotion of a discourse of mutual religious understanding, of a spirit of tolerance that is not simply a resigned acceptance of difference but an active welcoming of it. And African intellectuals first and foremost have the responsibility to respond to the demands our times make upon us in this regard, which include, among others: the promotion and diffusion of information about religious fact and interpretation; the explication of what should be the real signification of secularism; the insistence on the meaning and virtues of pluralism – put simply, reflection on the production of an African modernity.

Until now, the task of reflecting upon religious fact and interpretation has not been among the issues around which African intellectuals have rallied *en masse* – at least not those whom one routinely thinks of when one uses that word, that is, those who were trained in modern universities and that certain people baptize as “europhone” to distinguish them from intellectuals trained after the fashion of African “traditions” or in the madrasa. Precisely here lies one of the sources of our problems: the opposing

of two cultures and the fact that, as a rule, African social sciences, those of the so-called europhone intellectuals, have until now neglected the role of the religious. More precisely, they have left the work of reflecting (though most of the time this can scarcely be called “reflection,” given what that word implies about critical spirit) on the future of religious interpretation to those who proclaim themselves its professionals and conservers. For that matter, one must relativize the difference between “europhones” and “non-europhones.” What constitutes the identity of intellectuals beyond the language in which they formulate their thought – be it English, Mandinka, Portuguese, Hausa, French, Arabic, or another language – is that thought is never a peremptory dogmatism, but instead an anxious concern for the many ways in which the True can be said, a critical line of argument that integrates the possibility, legitimacy, and necessity of a pluralism of interpretations. The global phenomenon of religious fervor, which Gilles Kepel has called the “revenge of God” and which is particularly apparent and influential in Africa, obliges those who by profession think with critical distance to contribute to clarifying the meaning, for today’s world, of the permanent dialogue of texts and contexts which produces the dynamism of religions. Moreover, whether intellectuals take up the reflection on religions or not, the latter are nonetheless present today in what is commonly considered the intellectuals’ privileged domain: university campuses. That religious affiliations – evangelicals, born-again Christians, or Islamic associations – should today be so present in spaces that in the past were more likely to be identified with political ideologies says much about the current situation in Africa. There is another extreme case where religion has a direct impact on the African intellectual: this happens when – as was, in the darkest extremities of horror, recently the case in Algeria – the journalist or the university professor becomes the target of

killers who, acting in the name of God, judge their victim, in his very being, to be an incarnation of what must be eliminated.

One might think that the issue of religious identities, and the need to develop pluralist politics and attitudes with reference to them, is a question that has only been posed today, at a time when such identities have taken center stage. Nonetheless, one will note that a text disseminated “in the newspapers” calling for cooperation between the two most important religions of the Book on our continent was written by Léopold Sédar Senghor in 1960, the year that saw the majority of African countries become independent. One will also note that this text seems to address itself to our time of religious fervor in which, as in the Ivory Coast, political problems end up becoming confrontations of identity and assume the appearance of a religious war.⁸ In 1960, an era marked by the nationalist project and the will to modernization, Senghor – following in the footsteps of Gaston Berger, the inventor of the term “prospective” – was already anxious to see Christianity and Islam, which shared a claim on the hearts of Africans (“because,” he wrote, “black African animism is in the process of disappearing”), play their rightful part in this project and advance together, in mutual respect, toward their modernity. In the language of Senghor’s spiritualist socialism, that sounded like this: