

Aesthetic Perception and the Critique of Emblems: The Politics of the Visible in the Public Sphere in Africa

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To

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There has never been a society governed without words, images and liturgies. In the political field, particularly in former colonial states, three domains need to be considered:

1. *The Structural Domain*, which analyses the effects of power and its exercise, together with hierarchies, administrations, territories, and population movements;
2. *The Representational Domain*, which covers various thorny problems associated with political foundations, constitutions, and the ideologies that support political doctrine;
3. *The Fantastical Domain*, which involves the conscious or unconscious relationships between the subject and the structures of authority and power and the admiration or hatred that these engender in that subject, issues of gender projection and its relation to the way power is invested, and finally, the theatrical and textual frameworks of power and authority.

The structural, representational, and fantastical domains also relate to the three approaches by which the philosophical dimension of politics in Africa can be addressed. Close examination reveals that it is the domains of *structure* and *representation* that dominate this discussion. Research into the violence of the post-colonial State and the dynamics of globalization are a particular current focus. It has been thus established that the experience of the post-colonial African State has been one of prolonged heteronomy and a gradual but ineluctable erosion of human dignity.

In present-day Africa, the structure of the post-colonial State also tends to reflect the old colonial order, despite the concealment of this offered by the courtesies of international relations. This explains both the idea that micro-nation-states are unviable and the rise of Pan-Africanism, whose

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origins are nevertheless complex. Certain Pan-Africanist thinkers believe that in a Pan-African environment, the 'African identity' (something still in the process of becoming) will be able to express itself through fraternity and a rediscovered harmony. However, African political theorists have rejected this essentialist conception of Pan-Africanism, preferring to speak rather of 'cosmopolitanism'. Under this newer approach, political identities and theories derive from cultural multiplicity, trade and migration flows, and international law (to keep in check the baser behaviours of nation-states). The only problem with this otherwise worthy theory of a cosmopolitan socio-political organization is that it neglects to subject the prevalent market economy to any serious political and philosophical criticism.

When reflecting on the question of *representation* in post-colonial states, consideration needs to be given to matters of ethnicity, to how new social classes are constituted, and the relationship between politics, religion, and sexuality. How can 'the people' of post-colonial states best be characterized? What form of discipline may be established and how might a new post-colonial national subjectivity be conceived? How should the images projected by political leaders be evaluated and what shall we call this 'representation'? Who critiques these images?

Questions concerning the fantastical domain, on the other hand, are often eclipsed by the ones relating to representation, as mentioned above. Where African political theoreticians have criticized state ideologies, they often fail to explain why a people may remain attached to these power structures and their outward expression. Despite the severe criticism of the forms of African Socialism promoted by Senghor and Nyerere, the mockery made of Mobutu's notion of 'authenticity', and the disrespect for Colonel Gaddafi's Green Book, people have embraced these ideologies often voluntarily and in good faith (though this does not mean they are all on the same level). How can we explain this emotional investment?

A nation's existence is typically encapsulated by a number of formative events and developments: it may frequently be built on a *genesis narrative* which is often mythic (for example, the Roman narrative of Romulus and Remus); on this may be built the recollection of a survived catastrophe accompanied by the enshrinement of past heroes, martyrs, apostates, hereditary enemies, celebrations, monuments, and most importantly, the incorporation of a form of ritual prothesis demonstrating the presence of power and authority.

Our investigation will therefore concentrate on the fantastical dimension, setting aside for the moment issues relating to constitutions, regime formation, politics, and the various modes of repression that states engage in. We shall on the contrary discuss the aesthetic emblems which underpin the intertwining of national memory, economic ruse, and official subterfuge to create a multi-faceted post-colonial subject. This aesthetic question will be not only a matter of philosophical metaphysics but will also address what binds people together within the public sphere. This paper will show that political concerns are co-extensive with all concerns of the State, and that the State's presence is not just a political mode. In the first place it is essential to recognize that the relation between representation and politics revolves around the political representation of emblems. The questions pertaining to the links between national narratives and perceptions of the visible then become the second avenue of exposition for this paper.

In particular, the aim is to examine the idea of consumption from a perspective of political aesthetics. To characterize what we mean by 'consumption', we will adopt Baudrillard's understanding of the term:

Neither the volume of goods nor the satisfaction of needs serves properly to define the notion of consumption [...] Consumption is not a material practice nor is it a phenomenology of 'affluence'. It is not defined by the nourishment we take in, nor by the clothes we clothe ourselves with, nor by the car we use, nor by the oral and visual matter of the images and messages we receive. It is defined, rather, by the

organization of all of these things into a signifying fabric; consumption is [...] an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs. [...] To become an object an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign. (1996: 199–200)

The junction between philosophy and aesthetics is first effected during the consumption of signs, among which can be found emblems. Following discussion of this, we will consider the narratives without which any understanding of politics of the sign would be impossible.

I. The Politics of the Sign

1. Preamble

Any discussion of politic anthropology requires an initial discussion about identity. In the post-colonial situation, the question of identity arises across at least three successive moments. First, there is the confusion of identities, next their intersection, and finally the displacement of these identities and the gaps that this leaves. In order to speak of identity, we must take into account Ricœur's distinction between commutative identity (*identité-idem*) and identity that is formed by and during its own decomposition and reconstitution through the conjunction of the event and its own narrative (*identité-ipse*) (Ricœur 1992). The act of colonization effectively blurred the identities of both the colonizer and the colonized, and both, in appropriating their own stories – either to justify theoretically or anthropologically their revolt (the colonized), or to give substance to the discourse of colonization (the colonizer) – have deeply distorted their relationships with themselves, with others and with their institutions. Who am I? What am I? These two aspects of the question of identity (the *who* and the *what*) cannot be separated, and have been a particular focus of analysts of both colonial and post-colonial situations. Following the colonialist venture, the post-colonial discourse entered a phase of what Ricœur calls the 'overlapping of narratives'. When one engages in a discourse on the post-colony, one tremendous fact is often left aside – that *identity is a mirror* which serves individuals, groups, peoples, and nations as a means of self-reflection in order to dispel doubts and fill in gaps. But it is a mirror that is shattered. The tiny fragments that now compose it henceforth reflect an image of the self that is broken, deformed, and often comical. Thus, for those of us who ask questions of the post-colony and cosmopolitanism, not only the identity of our own images but also that of our discourse about post-colonies is largely affected by an ideological *autonomization*. Our discourse on the post-colony (whether it be qualified philosophically, politically, anthropologically, or from other standpoints) often fails to take into consideration that the thought directed to this domain cannot leave aside all reference to the question of emblems. How is this important, and how can we explain its absence in the discourse and critique of the post-colony? How might the question of the emblematic be inserted into the general colloquy of the post-colony?

2. The Importance of the Emblem

When out in the open sunlight, the biped that is man universally experiences a sense of duality in the observation of his own shadow, however banal that experience might seem. We are made double by our shadow that follows behind or goes ahead of us. The shadow adjacent to us on the ground shows us that the image – whether of ourselves or of others, or of the things we are attached to or have derived from our genealogical heritage – points to what we are made of once we stand erect. The Latin for 'to stand erect', *stare*, connects to the word 'status', and by further extension, to the 'state' in which something exists. Thus, the notion of 'standing erect' is intimately connected

with the projected image or shadow. This close association between standing (*stare*), the state of being of a thing (*status*), and its projection and representation in the form of an image (*statua*) reminds us that we cannot talk about the post-colony – either from the seat of power or outside of it as a critic – without referring to the question of images and their representational force. The State (*status*) is a complex mesh of closely interconnected images. In the context of the post-colonial State, the dimension of the *imaginal* and its association with perceptions of the body cannot be avoided. Here in particular, thought is intimately linked to a sense of physicality.

By its very nature, the concept of an image involves an aesthetic perception. I am here using the term ‘aesthetic’ in its original Greek sense of ‘relating to sensorial apprehension’, but where this apprehension is then transmuted through thought, which involves adopting a poetic stance in order to express it. Whether it is a matter of the liberation of peoples, the creation of a memory that may erase the issues of history, or questions relating to gender, territory, nation, or cosmopolitanism, it is always the case that we cannot avoid an examination of the various rituals that impinge upon these matters. But before we address those generated by societies and state structures, let us first examine the ritual of critical discourse itself through which the post-colonial question is brought under discussion. In the context of our synthetic or analytical criticisms of the post-colony, how do we address the question of the *mise en scène* and theatricality of this discourse? In other words, under what conditions can we bring to light the undercurrents which may influence our denunciations of the post-colonial State? A theatre encompasses, among other elements, a *stage* (the place where characters and images evolve in full view of the audience), the *wings* (the obscure zone where the prompts, the stage crew, the light technicians, and the wardrobe personnel do their work), the *flies*, from where the flymen raise or lower the sets, and suffusing all of these spaces is the *intrigue* – the plot of the play, which draws the audience into the nexus of what is played out.

So what kind of plots do our observations about the post-colony imply? The plot seems to designate those falsely innocent representations which enable an institutional system to stand erect. The emblems which are involved in these plots are those associated with religions, business, corporate bodies, financial institutions, armies and so on. But considering that writing conceives the emblem as a veil, the attempted unveiling of deceptions in post-colonial questions through written discourse cannot adequately account for the importance of the emblem. The emblem concentrates within itself both sign and symbol. Legendre (2001: 124–125) points to the symbolic forms that monetary currency takes as an example of this. He extends this analysis to uncover the emblem as ‘a generalized religious form, a ritual representation of authority spread across all levels of society (communities, associations, political parties, businesses), and especially at the sovereign level of national States by the ceremonials of flags’. The power of the emblem is that it penetrates the horizon of the subject, influencing both his speaking and imagining. Legendre asks: ‘Literally, what is an emblem? Derived from Greek by way of Latin, *emblema* referred to a raised or inlaid ornament (on wood, on a vase); the noun is formed from the verb [...] (*emballô*) meaning “to throw inside”. An emblem is just that: [...] an inlaying of the sign in man’ (ibid.: 127). The emblem forces the speaking and imagining creature that is man to enter the domain of the fantastical and the imaginal, outside of which institutions could not function.

The range of emblems present, and the sense apprehensions that become attuned to them, direct that post-colonial research cannot ignore this fantastical domain. A very valuable line of research would be to examine the symbolic and material manner by which dreams, images, fears, loves, and emblems are represented in African societies.

Flags. Flags fulfil many emblematic roles, one of which is to indicate surrender during war, when a plain white flag is brandished or when a flag is visibly hauled down from its mast-head. Hence, the

flag always embodies a concentration of associations by which the relationship of a history to its own unfolding and its own representation may be read. The flag marks the moment of institution of a political or corporate entity. In order for this entity to be so instituted, there must have been a seminal event, a narrative or symbolic deed more than a written text that preceded its adoption; the flag condenses all these components through the colours, the animal imagery, or the symbols of the human and natural worlds that it portrays. Each flag is thus intimately linked to time and action. A device of anamnesis, the flag refers to the past as establisher, constantly recalling the moment of its foundation and of its gestation. A flag is also a call to action in present time; it is waved as a sign of belonging or of recognition, and it can symbolize both victory and defeat.

The imagery of the flag leads us to a critique of the 'political economy of the sign' (Baudrillard 1996) in those of post-colonial Africa. What is shown by the flames, stars, crescent moons, knives, lions, birds, and flowers that can be found on the flags of certain African states? How can we explain the denial of the integrity of nature by some post-colonial states who often accept the stockpiling of nuclear waste on their territories, yet retain images of nature on their flags? One can also read international politics and relationships of domination – whether real or symbolic – across these flags. The now defunct People's Republic of the Congo had a purely red flag with a crossed hammer and hoe in the top left corner – a clear echo of the flag of the Soviet Union with its hammer and sickle emblem. Likewise, while the Angolan flag, adopted when the country had a Marxist government, has replaced these symbols with a half cog-wheel crossed by a machete, their disposition also recalls Soviet symbolism. On the other hand, certain countries show the Muslim crescent on their flags, even though their constitutions affirm that they are secular states. How then can we reconcile the declared universalism of certain countries with the nationalist character evoked by the devotion to a flag? What enduring symbolism may be accorded to these flags should cosmopolitanism come to replace nationalism in these countries?¹

Coins and banknotes. Historians date the minting of coins from the development of cities whose leaders began to codify and publish their laws in order to shield these from the arbitrariness of interpretation. The Greek word *nomisma*, when referring to coinage signifies the 'legal object', that is, the only coins acceptable as currency due to their being approved and guaranteed by the issuing authority (Elayi and Elayi 1989: 25). In this way, coinage has a very close connection with the State as the issuer and guarantor of currency. The issuance of coins and banknotes by post-colonial countries thus allows examination not only of their monetary policies, but also of who or what is represented on these coins and notes, and why. Why is it that in Francophone African countries where the Bank of France guarantees their currency values, the CFA franc pieces or bills are adorned with the images of African political leaders? France guarantees their monetary value, but the local state determines their iconographic representation. Reflection on the aesthetics of these coins and banknotes will show who controls the real power and who only the power of representation and ornamentation.

Three elements testify to the gap between the effective and the simply ornamental power behind these monetary symbols. These are, first, the iconography of the various paper-money motifs and colours, second, the often narcissistic rendition of the portraits of political leaders on both bills and coins, and third, the emblematic animals and birds used in designs which assert the value of the culture of the country in question. Given this separation between outward image and inner reality, what status on the international stage can these states claim when they master only the decorative billboards for the drama and not the drama itself?

Philately. While not intending to traverse the history of the postage stamp nor of the rubber stamps used to authorize documents, we will say that the stamp is also part of the emblematic nexus by which the nature and identity of the post-colony is made manifest. A stamp points to the relationship that each letter or document bearing that stamp has with the *norm*. Etymologically, *norm* derives from the Latin *norma* meaning a carpenter's square (Legendre 1998: 251). A stamped letter reaffirms, at each passage from hand to hand, that it is carrying a message that presents itself as 'normal' through the decoration on the envelope enclosing it, even if the message itself subverts institutional constructions; in other words, it has undergone the *squaring* demanded of it by the legitimate authority that has issued or affixed the stamp.

Though in itself apparently a mere ornament, the importance of the stamp on the postcard or letter lies in its signifying that the letter comes under the influence of, and is subject to the permission of, authority. Our supposedly private messages, even when they are provocative, indignant, or subversive in their content, all carry the 'stamp' of authority, implicitly allowing those authorizing these communications to control them or interfere with them.

What about the representations that can be found on the stamps themselves? It matters little that the state issuing the stamp is totalitarian, democratic, liberal, colonial, post-colonial, communist, or cosmopolitan in its government or social structure. Its presence is constant, because stamps are used not only on letters but also on documents that define our administrative identity: birth, death, and marriage certificates, drivers' licences, passports, and many other documents. Our imaginal system is thus subtly framed by the State by this tiny visible marker which effectively becomes invisible through the little attention we pay to it. But in this 'invisibility' of the postage or tax stamp, the State reveals itself, penetrating into our private lives by becoming the shadow that accompanies us wherever we go.

II. The Politics of Narrative and Perception

1. Living Together in the Public Sphere. The Role of Narrative

Once political thought frees itself from the stranglehold of religion – in the usual sense of the term – it becomes centred upon itself as the sole source of truth. The question then becomes: how do secular republican states which have dismissed religion and myth as the foundations of their truth secure sociopolitical thought upon itself? Is it possible to generate and guarantee social cohesion merely through law? Constitutionalists and political scientists would respond that once any search for a hidden essence in politics has been abandoned, the self-creation of political legitimacy consists in recognizing and laying hold of the realities of the society – the mechanisms of power by which those social realities may be commanded. But this 'positivism' which limits itself to the factual environment ignores one fundamental parameter of a city's or a community's constitution – the connective force of the word. A political community is above all a dialogic sphere where utterances circulate. Action is sometimes only possible because it is orchestrated by performative utterances. The word – or speech – is an essential component in the constitution of the democratic space.

The emergence of the Greek *polis* coincided with the rise of public speech. The Greeks believed that there could be no community (κοινωνία) without justice (δίκη), without laws (νόμος), without equality before the law, without the right of each citizen to present himself in front of the people's assembly, and finally without freedom of speech. 'That which implies the system of the *polis* is above all an extraordinary preeminence of the word over all instruments of power' (Vernant 1975: 44).

The role of the word – or speech – and its close relationship to the constitution of the political sphere equally appears in African traditions. In those traditions, the word constitutes, imposes,

establishes, separates, curses, reunites, and questions, but does not die. The word delivers past traditions to the individual: Calame-Griaule (1965: 26) reports that among the Dogons of Mali there is a close connection between tradition and speech – and he who ‘knows the word’ connects with tradition. But speaking is not merely oral utterance, it is governed by a certain *mise en ordre* or ordering – to speak means to obey rules. The formal speech rituals of certain tribal societies enable forms of combative speech which exemplify the double nature of the speech-act in the tribal setting: the respect for word exchange – implying the non-monopolization of the speech domain – and the formulation of the topic for discussion. Such speech rituals typically involve an entire ethics of the use of the word. Studies that take traditional African formal speech rituals either as a model of ‘African-style democracy’ or as the inaugural process of a future consensus, fail to observe that despite the abundance and vigour of the subject matter of such exchanges, there is also a ‘*dis-sensus*’ at work. Beyond their ritual nature (involving ordeal, staging, narration, conciliation), such speech engagements bring out the essential functions of word, speech, and narrative.

The notion of narrative is important for the constitution of the democratic sphere because to be subject to law is to see oneself defined by a word: that which separates, and that which accompanies and reconciles.² Moreover, democracy is above all a narrative, as it is there that the subject speaks, and narrates the arrival of law, discord, and connection. This is the task that ritual speech exchange invites: to say and to narrate in a free space the foundational stories of democracy. Such formal speech environments – though not without handicaps and inherent imperfections – may serve temporarily as a democratic paradigm in that they articulate the notions of tolerance, justice, self-expression, and the act of listening to others.

2. Formulating the Dimension of the Visible

The formulation of that which is social does not primarily concern discussion, but it does require an ‘ethic of seeing’. Speaking implies seeing and being seen. What does it mean to look at an institution, and what is implied by the verb *to institute*? What is the role of *investment* in the act of institution? How does the interweaving of individual investment and institution come to pass? The linking factor is that of the gaze. According to philosophical theory, that which transfixes the objectified other – and, to a certain extent, reveals the other to himself – can be found in the subjective gaze. But the gaze also effects a kind of division. When the gaze is turned inward, the subject divides – or doubles – himself, producing a kind of a split-screen image (composed of one side where he is the gazer, and one where he is gazed upon). These two sides of the gaze are relevant to the subject’s self-image, but when the object is in view, it then becomes a question of the dynamism that the gazed-upon other offers the subject’s gaze. Merleau-Ponty provides an excellent distinction to aid in the evaluation of the gaze. The *voir ceci* [‘seeing this’] is distinct from the *voir selon* [‘seeing accordingly’]. *Voir ceci* is a gaze directed upon the chosen object, while the *voir selon* adds intentionality and perspective. To gaze with intent – or to look upon – thus becomes a political act.

Investment. We invest in the *representation* of objects and subjects just as much as we invest in the objects and subjects themselves. Etymologically, the word ‘invest’ means to put on an article of clothing. When looking at an object that has been sculpted, printed, or painted by the State, we clothe it – or invest it – in three ways:

- a) with love, which transforms it into a fetish that is adored. With such a response we clothe the object with a part of ourselves;

- b) with a hatred that transforms the object into a fetish of revulsion for our own repulsions and hang-ups; and
- c) with indifference that leaves whole – that is, intact and unquestioned – the fetish of personal involvement.

Faced with a banknote issued by the State, the individual, especially if he is poor, is likely to adopt the attitude of fetishization according to which the act of destroying this bill would be considered madness, if not sacrilege. But looking at the photograph of a politician whom we despise, our negative emotions will often emerge to transfer our hatred on to the image itself, investing it with this animosity. Stated another way, we clothe the image in the rags that inhibit us. Finally, when seeing a revenue stamp, a seal, or a postage stamp, we tend to pay little or no attention – we are indifferent – to its demonstration of political power. This non-investment in the apparently trivial representations of authority is symptomatic of the confused relationship we have with the face of power, when seen through the multiple small and distorted images of the shattered mirror through which we perceive the multiple facets of power. Investment, whether positive or negative or operating in the form of denial within a framework of indifference, reminds us that, prior to its outward expression through elections, forms of government, and modes of justice, the political life begins as a series of negotiations with the symbolic. Anthropological structures of the imagination – to use the title of Gilbert Durand's book: *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* – are indispensable for understanding the relationship between emotion and politics. Subjects laying claim to human rights *under law* do not have an immediate connection to the *real*. In order to reach reality, the subject must first engage with how the real is symbolically represented through narratives and images. But investment in the imagination is often dubious territory for most African philosophers, who are frequently too engrossed in 'important' issues of rationality, epistemological method, types of knowledge (whether endogenous or exogenous), aesthetic categories, cultural diversity, and more recently cosmopolitanism and ecology. What we philosophers tend to forget here is that a life of reason cannot simply ignore myth, rite, and liturgy. We are only subjects because we are already preceded by and wrapped up in a preset symbolic process to which we give the name of 'culture'.

Conclusion

To understand the nature of the aesthetic, we must start from its etymology – meaning the sensual apprehension of thought. The Greek verb (αἰσθάνομαι) means to perceive through the senses, to feel and understand. We cannot understand the dynamics of institutions if we are not aware of the emotions or affects that induce belief in them (*le faire-croire*). Hence, in the context of post-colonial Africa, we cannot understand African politics if we are ignorant of its aesthetic envelope. Any critique of the post-colonial State must draw attention to the phenomenon of social iconostasis. This 'social iconostasis insists in this way upon the fact that the system of images crafted by the aesthetic is not an epiphenomenon but rather a force that literally makes society exist and stand erect, as if society were a singular subject' (Legendre 2001: 138).

Notes

1. See Boime 1998. The author analyses how behind the Statue of Liberty and the American flag, a political agenda that is nationalist, protectionist, and sometimes racist has been deployed.
2. There are, for example, forbidden words; certain objects and persons (the chief, the father, the ancestors) cannot be named in some cultures. To say something implies circumlocution and regulation, and in a democracy to have freedom of speech signifies regulating what is said.

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