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REVIEW

CRITIQUE OF BLACK REASON

MBEMBE, A. (Durham: Duke University Press. 2017)
240pp. EAN: 978-1-77614-050-3

This book is a translation of the French version by the same author entitled, *Critique de la raison nègre*, which first appeared in 2013. It was translated into English by Laurent Dubois in 2017.

As the title goes, this is an attempt at expounding primarily what the author understands to be Black reason. Mbembe thus finds it necessary to go the extra mile in trying to explain what Black reason is, how it is conceived, and so forth. He notes, nonetheless, that the notion “Black reason” remains an ambiguous and polemical term. Mbembe reckons that “Black reason is in truth a complicated network of doubting, uncertainty, and equivocation” (p. 10). Mbembe’s point of departure in speaking of race (or racism), as he puts it, can only be a discourse that happens in imperfect language. He seems disinterested in pointing out the deliberate creation of the notion for political and conquest reasons.

Consequently, the views shared by, among others, Valentine Mudimbe, in his book *The invention of Africa*, and the Guyanese scholar Walter Rodney, in his book *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, appear to be of hardly any significance to Mbembe, as he sets out on a journey of dealing with Black reason. In this instance, I refer specifically to Rodney, because both he and Mbembe were at some stage associated with the Council for the Development of Social Sciences in Africa (CODESRIA).

I was immediately reminded of the late South African anthropologist Archie Mafeje’s criticism of Mbembe in his rebuttal of another article by Mbembe

entitled “African modes of self-writing”, which appeared in the CODESRIA Bulletin. In that same year, Mafeje reviewed the mentioned work for the *Southern African Political and Economic Monthly*. It carried the following title, “Apropos ‘African modes of self-writing’: Adieu Mbembe”. The question of Mbembe’s deliberate ignorance of structural racism leads Mafeje (2000:35) to aver:

it is clear that in Mbembe’s mind racism is associated with actually existing races, for he goes into a long and interminable discussion about the existence of non-[B]lack Africans on the African continent. This is beside the point because all these various peoples had been colonised and subjected to [W]hite racism, irrespective of their complexion.

When race is thus viewed in the way that Mbembe suggests, as merely a grey phenomenon, one can understand why he seems gratified to merely hone in on the perversion of the concept; yet what led to the perversion is immaterial to him. The fact that Mbembe is not indicating the vantage point from which he is making his case is not clear, from the outset, in setting up the context in which talk of Black reason is to happen and, therefore, his benevolent offering of a critique of Black reason (pp. 10-11).

It does seem, however, that the imperfect way of his speaking of race does not have a particular historical origin. I say this because it would have been beneficial to the reader to understand, from the outset, why Mbembe prefers to speak of race only in an imperfect manner. Under the section simply entitled “The noun ‘Black’”, Mbembe engages the differences among Black people themselves. He makes use of the condition of the African American and the discourse, in the past and present, of some Black scholars who reject the notion of the unity between those who were left in Africa and those who were uprooted from the African continent and deposited on the shores of the Americas.

Mbembe tries to make an obvious case that Black people also have differences among themselves. Referring to the views shared by, among others, Ralph Ellison, he refers to the double consciousness motif and, hence, argues that this is the reason why the differences between Black people in the United States of America and the Caribbean are, in fact, real (p. 25). I am of the opinion though that, in the condensed historical presentation he provides in order for the reader to understand the case he is putting forward, Mbembe tries to do simply too much on this subject. This contributes to the confusion that is palpable in his submission.

Mbembe seems to endorse some of the most bizarre sentiments on Black people that would make any self-respecting Black conscious

scholar cringe. He refers, for instance, to Henry Blanton Parks who considered American Blacks and Africans as two distinct races because of the prolonged contact of the former with civilization (p. 27).

In giving substance to the views shared by those whose vantage point insisted that Africans were not fully human, Mbembe makes one rather curious in wanting to understand what his own position is on this matter. It is rather unbecoming of a scholar of his calibre to seem to concede to views suggesting that Black reasoning's primary activity was fantasizing. He writes:

from the beginning, its [[B]lack reasoning] primary activity was fantasizing. It consisted essentially in gathering real or attributed traits, weaving them into histories, and creating images. The modern age, however, was a decisively formative moment for [B]lack reason, owing on the one hand, to the accounts of travellers, explorers, soldiers, adventurers, merchants, missionaries and settlers and, on the other, to the constitution of a colonial science of which "Africanism" is the last avatar (p. 27).

As if that is not enough, he adds that "[B]lack reason was not only a system of narratives and discourses with academic pretensions but also the reservoir that provided the justification for the arithmetic of racial domination. It was, admittedly, not completely devoid of a concern for the truth" (p. 27). Perhaps we ought to give Mbembe some credit for inserting, in this otherwise rather obtuse view of Africa, some semblance of the search for some truth in the caricature of Africa as put forward by him. The Africa and the Black condition that Mbembe is speaking of echoes the Africa and her people, as observed by Joseph Conrad in his *Heart of darkness*.

This brings me to the very issue that made it almost impossible for me to bring myself to reading this book to the very last page. I have read other works of Mbembe and when asked to review this book, I had to ask myself to try my level best to approach this work with an open mind. I was hoping that such open-mindedness would allow me to shelve the views I have noted of other African scholars on the manner in which Mbembe writes about Africa and her people. I must admit that this became an impossible task, and I conceded with every page I read that, in fact, these scholars had a point in their assessment of Mbembe.

I also perceived very clearly in this book that Mbembe has a deep dislike for anything African. In response to Mbembe's "African modes of self-writing", Mafeje is incensed with the way in which Mbembe writes about Africans. Mafeje himself was, at one point, very closely associated with CODESRIA and happened to have had numerous exchanges with the

fellows during his stint at CODESRIA. Mafeje's opening line in his review of Mbembe's "African modes of self-writing" is one that, I submit, remains relevant, even for this work entitled *Critique of Black reason*. Mafeje (2000:33) writes quite movingly:

Achille Mbembe writes about Africa and the Africans like Lord Hume. However, as is known, Lord Hume was ignorant about Africa. Strange as it may sound, it would not be too far-fetched to accuse Mbembe of the same. Or is it because for him there is nothing real or valid about Africa; or because all is reducible to a "collective *imaginaire*"? Lord Hume's saving grace is that he was a good European philosopher. What is Mbembe's claim to fame?

Mafeje was indeed right about Mbembe. The fact that he does not seem to take criticism from African scholars seriously is precisely why one must ask, who are Mbembe's real conversational partners? Perhaps it is not by chance that, even though *Critique of Black reason* was first published in 2013, it was translated into English only in 2017.

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