The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa

Elias K. Bongmba
THE DIALECTICS OF TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA
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Elias Kifon Bongmba
This book is dedicated to the loving memory of

Monica Munkeng Bongmba
Abel Yuven Bongmba
Alice Ntala Bongmba

And also to Odelia Y. Bongmba for her constant support
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This book is a personal attempt to make sense of the debate on African issues by scholars and observers of the African sociopolitical scene. In it, I reflect on what is now generally called “the African crisis.” My aim is to suggest humanistic avenues for transforming Africa. I argue that such a humanistic approach lies in the recovery of religious and theological critiques of power and the recovery and deployment of relationality. The book begins with a meditation, a lamentation, and a confrontation with Africa and offers a narrative of the corruption of power and the effect such a praxis has had on Africa. I also explore and offer critical perspectives on projects of recovery that remain crucial for transformation. My goal is to suggest that humanistic interventions could enable Africans to work through their personal and political relations to chart a new course of action. In that sense, I also express hope that the present course of events will be reversed and that we can talk of “Afro-optimism.”

I grew up in Cameroon, and spent some years in Nigeria. Before leaving Cameroon, I worked for the Cameroon Baptist Convention, serving churches in rural areas such as Wanti and Ntumbaw and in the urban environments of Kumba; and Yaoundé. I lived through the administration of President Ahidjo and the early part of the administration of President Biya and remember very vividly the days of the one-party state, the mystique that surrounded power, and the pomp and circumstance of the Cameroonian bureaucratic system. While growing up, I knew that Cameroonians were hard-working people. Like many Cameroonians, I listened to President Ahidjo’s call for Cameroonians to join a new revolution—the Green Revolution. This call to turn to agriculture and plant food crops as well as cash crops succeeded because many Cameroonians took pride in farming. My family tried to grow coffee, but did not succeed. We then took up rice farming, and for many years used the income from rice farming to supplement what my father earned as a day laborer at the Estates and Agency Company Limited, which grew tea in the town of Ndu. Like many other Cameroonian families, we struggled to meet our needs and did not think that life was bad. However, we all lived in a state governed by one single political party, the president ruled by decree, and there were very few freedoms. We were aware that the complex state machinery that President Ahidjo had established was a hindrance to development. Everywhere one looked, it was evident that life could not go on as usual, because the massive
government bureaucracy was ineffective. In 1982, Ahidjo suddenly resigned from his position as head of state. We were frightened by this move, but after a few days, we also fell in love with the new president, Paul Biya, who preached rigor and moralization.

In 1985, I left Cameroon to study in the United States; soon after that, Cameroon and the rest of Africa was plunged into an economic crisis. In response to this situation, the president called on Cameroonian to tighten their seat belts, saying only that the times were difficult. Since then I have followed the story of these difficulties in Cameroon and other African countries and have had numerous discussions with my colleagues and mentors about Africa. I have debated African issues with colleagues at the African Studies Association, the American Academy of Religion, and other academic forums. I have made several trips to Africa in the past seven years, doing research on gender issues and on witchcraft. During these visits, I have talked with politicians, academics, business people, and ordinary people about the state of affairs in Cameroon and Africa. In this book, I have attempted to give my perspective on these issues. This work should be seen as my own hermeneutical perspective on the human condition in Africa and on ideas that remain crucial to reconstructing and changing all social relations that involve political praxis in Africa.

I do not pretend that I understand the whole story. I do not even pretend that I have clearly understood the parts of the story that I have tried to understand, or that I have articulated them in a manner agreeable to all readers. Experts in different fields will raise legitimate questions about my approach and the broad sweep I have given to some topics, and some will point out issues that I have ignored. My perspective, like other perspectives, is limited and provisional. These reflections must be taken for what they are—personal and partial reflections on the human condition, and an invitation for a broader interdisciplinary conversation on these issues.

In bringing together my thoughts on these issues over the last three years, I have had conversations with numerous scholars at conferences and lectures and through email exchanges, all of which cannot be mentioned here because of space constraints. However, I must express my appreciation to the following people, who have listened to me, given me critical perspectives, and shared some of their work with me: E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, Edith Wyschogrod, Charles Villa-Vicencio, Steven G. Crowell, Nantang Jua, John Mukum Mbaku, Diane Ciekawy, Rita Kiki Edozie, Obioma Nnaemeka, Anthony B. Pinn, and Isabella Mukonyora. Andrew Lazo and Catherine Howard read the entire manuscript and provided useful comments. I also extend my appreciation to the dedicated staff of Fondren Library of Rice University for their assistance in locating material and getting them through interlibrary loan in a timely manner. I thank
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My reflections on Mahmood Mamdani’s work, which appear in Chapter 2, were first presented at the Pathways Conference organized by Toyin Falola at the University of Texas in April 2001. I am thankful to Professor Falola for inviting me to participate in that conference. Chapter 7 was presented as a public lecture titled “Theological Perspectives on Power in Africa” at the Global Review Forum at the International House, Illinois State University, March 21, 2002. I am thankful to the Global Review Committee and to Professor Cassandra Veney, who was a member of the Committee and of the African Studies faculty of Illinois State University, for inviting me to speak on that topic. Parts of Chapter 4 were presented at a panel on African philosophy and contemporary issues at the African Studies Association in Houston in 2001. Finally, I presented the final chapter at a panel on “African Philosophy, How I See It” at the African Studies Association in Boston in October 2003. I am grateful to Dismas Masola and Barry Hallen for inviting me to be on the panel. My research trip to Cameroon in the summer of 2000 and 2001 was supported by the Mosle faculty grant and administered by the dean of humanities at Rice University. I am thankful to Dean Stokes, Dean Gary Wihl, and Becky Heye for providing summer travel grants to Cameroon. Finally, I am thankful to Odelia Yuh Bongmba, who has debated these issues with me on a daily basis, sometimes challenging me to look beyond my own questions as I try to cultivate a sense of hope about the future of Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

The Economist, in its May 13–19, 2000, edition, carried a dramatic cover: a map of Africa, a picture of a young soldier with a gun slung over his shoulder, and a headline reading “The Hopeless Continent.” Briefly summarizing the cover story, the editors wrote: “What is it about Africa? The crisis in Sierra Leone is only the latest in a catalogue of horrors. The continent is plagued with floods and famine, poverty, disease and state-sponsored thuggery. The West cannot solve these problems, but should try harder to help.” Calling the strife in Sierra Leone a special yet typical case, the editors contended that Africa “has poverty and disease in abundance, and riches too: its diamonds sustain the rebels who terrorize the place. It is unusual only in its brutality: rape, cannibalism and amputation have been common, with children . . . among the victims.”

This reporting on Africa continues to draw criticism for its bias, shallowness, and negativity. Academics who see complexity in African and global issues warn us that this reporting continues a long tradition of the misrepresentation of Africa. Africanists should rightly scrutinize media and popular bias, which ignore the historical, contextual, and international dimensions of the crises they report. Today criticism of negative media bias is tempered by the reality that something has indeed gone wrong on the continent. There is little doubt now that a certain political praxis has created the social climate in which agony thrives, and that this has exacerbated the effects of natural disasters and brought the continent to the brink of collapse.

This book examines the human condition (political, economic, and social) in Africa. That condition is not much worse in Africa than in other places in the world but I focus on Africa because of my personal and professional relationship to the continent. The book is about transformation and is situated on the dialectic of pessimism and optimism, because one cannot write off Africa and one cannot dismiss some of the attempts that have been made to transform the human condition on the continent. In this analysis I take positions on the priorities of the postcolonial state, and such positions cannot be interpreted mainly as advocacy in scholarship or prescription, but ought to be seen for what they are—perspectives that
offer certain convictions about the role of the state. This is not the place for a debate on the appropriateness of prescriptive language and positions, but I should point out that the nature of the issues addressed in this book requires constructive proposals, which others might see mainly as prescriptions.

I reflect on Africa from an interdisciplinary perspective, employing a methodological approach articulated by John Dunn, who has argued that theoretical work ought to diagnose a predicament and reflect on ways to confront the predicament. A theorist who seeks to address an issue should: (1) give an account of the present situation, (2) articulate an alternative situation, and (3) indicate what is needed to move to the alternative situation. In what follows, I provide a selective hermeneutical perspective on the sociopolitical crises in Africa. In the first part of the book (Chapters 1–4), I define the politics that has created the crisis, discuss the genesis, and describe the recovery projects undertaken by African states. In the second part (Chapters 5–7), I discuss humanistic prospects for recovery, highlighting the reconstruction of intersubjective relations and gender equality, and offering theological perspectives on power. Readers already familiar with the expert literature on the African crisis will be particularly interested in the second part of the book, where I claim that humanistic approaches, which stress intersubjective bonds, would strengthen recovery.

This book therefore is a dialogue rooted in the Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences). By taking this approach, I do not draw sharp distinctions between the human sciences and the other sciences. I agree with Cornel West that: “the difference [between] Geisteswissenschaften and Naturewissenschaften is between the relative stability of normal vocabularies in the natural sciences and the relative instability of normal vocabularies in the human sciences . . . And the irreducibility of one vocabulary to another implies not an ontological or methodological distinction but only a functional difference.” Preference for the functionality of the language of the human sciences reflects my background rather than my privileging of the humanities over other fields.

In the past, several African scholars have offered a compte rendu on the prospects of Africa. Ali Mazrui in his 1979 BBC Reith Lectures on the African condition discussed “Africa’s aches and pains.” Chinua Achebe discussed the situation in his 1984 book The Trouble With Nigeria, in which he argued: “the problem with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.” Wole Soyinka discussed the crisis in The Open Sore of a Continent. Mahmood Mamdani has analyzed the mechanism and structures of domination in Citizen and Subject. Recently, Achille Mbembe has written his critique of the postcolony. These are representative works in which Africans reflect on the taxing human condition in Africa. In reading
the literature, one is reminded that for nearly three decades, bewildered scholars have reflected on the highly contested view that a new and “dark age” has descended on the continent. The literature discusses economic decline, Leadership crises, betrayal, chaos, an open sore, and collapsed states; a condition caused by what Mbembe has called “a technology of domination” and “captured state.” The terminologies describe the situation in many African states and portray the precarious existence and the perilous times that demarcate and circumscribe human existence in states presided over by management systems that, though simultaneously strong and weak, have engaged in crusades of domination and exploitation unparalleled in recent history. Scholars argue that Africa’s leaders lack legitimacy and that their selfish ambitions have undermined their mission to govern.

In 1983, James Coleman and C. R. D. Halisi argued that thinking about Africa had shifted from “unbounded optimism” in the 1950s to “deep pessimism” in the 1970s. This mode of thought was later conceptualized as “Afro-pessimism.”

Writing about the African crisis poses great challenges. Africa as a colonial invention is a heterogeneous complexity that one has to study from a variety of angles. In addition, there are differences between states on politics, nationhood, political economy, religion, and the varied social relations, which colonial and postcolonial domination have so grievously compromised. Additionally, the writer’s task is complicated because the discourse on Africa has involved what Mbembe calls a “negative interpretation.” Such negativity is constitutive of the othering process and the politics of representation that has evolved out of the dynamics of Africa’s engagement with the rest of the world; that is the view that Africa is a result of global forces and the negative encounter with agents of enslavement and domination. Mbembe wonders if one needs to look for any discourse on Africa at all, because, he says, scholarship on Africa stresses arbitrariness, absence, lack, and nonbeing. However, Mbembe himself gives a compelling account, noting that the dearth of scholarship lies in the fact that most of the critiques lack “any sign of radical questioning,” and he concludes that social theory has failed in Africa. I do not propose a new social theory for Africa but instead reflect on the abuse of power that has created a human crisis of catastrophic proportions and offer humanistic perspectives on reconstructing social and political relations. Writing about the African crisis is an exercise of hope, because one should not write off the continent.

Another difficulty in writing about Africa is the tendency toward specialization, which prevents scholars from thinking in broad terms and across disciplines. Jeffrey Herbst argues: “The unwillingness of many Africanists to generalize has its origins in the need to differentiate countries
on the continent in the face of racist perceptions that Africa is a homoge-
neous region that is in constant turmoil.” The fear of presenting a homo-
geneous account has pushed scholars to specifics and to generate specialized
monographs on single issues and countries. Conscious of these challenges,
the scholar who attempts to write on broad themes soon realizes that he or
she encounters a broad representational spectrum in which to discuss the
malaise of Africa, its ruthless experimentation with coups, the decimation
of its economy, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and other social issues. Scholars can
face this challenge appropriately by building on proposals offered in differ-
ent fields. Those who engage in this discussion have to present their con-
clusions as partial perspectives that remain open to criticism, debate, and
amendment.

The argument of my book will proceed in the following manner. In
Chapter 1, I define the African crisis as the privatization of power, the pau-
perization of the state, the prodigalization of the state, and the proliferation
of violence. In Chapter 2, I argue that the genesis of the crisis lies in the
negative praxis of postcolonial leaders who decided to maintain the struc-
tures of domination established in the colonial era. In Chapters 3 and 4, I
analyze various reform projects: structural adjustment, democracy, good
governance, civil society, and the African Renaissance. These projects
remain crucial to recovery; Africans ought to look beyond structural and
institutional solutions to humanistic agendas that offer a critique of power.

In Chapter 5, I propose that Africans continue to rebuild intersubjective
bonds as part of an on-going political praxis. In Chapter 6, I engage in a
phenomenology of eros to argue that erotic plenitude and freedom ought
to structure gender relations as part of a broad socio-political renewal. I
offer a critique of the state of widowhood as an example of gender rela-
tions that could be reconfigured today. In Chapter 7, I provide a religious
and theological critique of power, arguing that a proper deployment of
power could create the conditions for an emancipatory political praxis. I
conclude the book by calling on Africans to employ love as a political
praxis. I have drawn materials from my research in Cameroon every sum-
mer from 1999 to 2003, and from my critical engagement with ideas on
and about Africa.

Scholars have used the term “Afro-pessimism” to express doubt that the
African state can survive its crisis without a major realignment of political
conditions and structural mechanisms of governance and social praxis.
While I share in large measure the assumptions of Afro-pessimism and fear
that the discourses on political recovery might ultimately be discourses on
the obituary of the continent, I also harbor a hope that refuses to yield the
day to Afro-pessimism and for that reason, I will propose an optimism that
begins with a love for Africa. I hope that dialogues about the continent,
which has been exposed as it has been enigmatized, could indeed con-
tribute ideas about empowering practices that could nurture human exis-
tence. I do not offer a unique African vision, but I reflect on common 
human themes that resonate with people who are interested in the realign-
ment of the forces that shape political experience.

The scholarly discourse seeking remedies has addressed nationalism, post-
coloniality, rationality, sovereignty of ideas, and critical self-consciousness 
of Africans in the determination of their own agenda. As welcomed as these 
reaffirmations and critical recontextualizations of discourses are, most 
Africans today are not focused on the inventions and crises of the past, but 
on negotiating and making meaning of the present. This does not mean that 
Africans do not think of the past and future. I mean that many Africans 
often focus on the need to survive on a daily basis and seek answers to the 
issues that bring discomfort first to the body and then to the body politic.

One may wonder about the futility of the discourses on Africa on two 
grounds. First, many Africans who have not been tempted with bourgeois 
pleasures may not be worried about negative dialectics and the discourse 
of agony as scholars are. After all, crisis or not, Africans have thought 
things through, come up with their own solutions, and to the best of their 
knowledge live normal lives, provide for their families, and raise children, 
some of whom are now part of the new African diaspora. Africans are 
aware of the resources available in other parts of the world because they 
have had a dynamic and conflictual relationship with the world. Their 
dynamic and problematic relationship with the rest of the world is 
reflected in Africa’s history, a narrative animated by enslavement, domina-
tion, and abandonment. However, the forces that dictate the nature of 
things in their societies do not appreciate, or tolerate, the views of the 
common person, and it is for that reason that one could say that the com-
mon person does not really care about what goes on elsewhere.

Second, the discourse about the failure of the state in Africa has for some 
time now become a discipline with a large library. A survey of the litera-
ture would be a daunting task, as would an attempt to give a comprehen-
sive account of the various interpretations. These discourses have their own 
“politics” manifested in claims of authenticity and Africanness—academic 
and political posturing designed to privilege certain voices. Regardless of 
their claims and motivations, the truth is that the crisis that has gripped 
political existence in Africa has shaken the very foundations of the post-
colonial state and forced scholars to rethink the nation-state in Africa and 
its conflicts ad nauseam. The crisis has manifested itself in various forms: 
wars, civil unrest, religious conflicts, poverty, mounting debt, shortage of 
food and fuel, lack of basic health services, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, 
and the deterioration of educational services and the decline of famous
institutions such as the University College of Ibadan, Makerere University, University of Nairobi, Yaoundé I University, and Foura Bay College. Many countries have very few prospects for capacity building. A failed political economy, poor management, and an excessive abuse of power have driven these issues. The discourse on Africa is about a dialectics of agony. I am aware that discussing the effects of political totality in Africa may just play into the hands of the detractors of Africa who are ready to write off the continent. Yet, one is challenged always to take a courageous stand, not only in the interest of critical scholarship, but also with the view of generating a new dialogue propelled by humanistic practices.

I should state that I do not discuss some issues systematically in this book. First, although I employ the designation “postcolonial” throughout the text, this is not a book on postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory has emerged in the metropole and is concerned with the global reality of the European imperial order, its definitive colonial projects, its continuities in neocolonialism, and the new age of global movements and displacements of people that has strengthened the subaltern voice as an alternative discourse in the metropole. Postcolonial theory reflects on the indelibility of the empire and offers alternative reconfigurations of global relations. Some of the thinkers include Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, Homi Bhabha, and Achille Mbembe. Homi Bhabha has called it a mode of discourse that reaches beyond one’s immediate horizon, and this is reflected in discourses that are prefixed by the word “post.” My book focuses on the crisis of the African state, and I offer humanistic perspectives on different ways of restoring social, economic, and political relations that have been damaged by the politics of greed.

Second, this is not a study of the state in Africa as such. I refer to the African state frequently and by this I mean postcolonial configurations that have emerged as nation-states in Africa, but I do not seek to offer a systematic study of the intractable and complex concept of the state. The liberal perspective posits the state as a free association of individuals who have come together to seek mutual good and undercut the Hobbesian drives of its members. For some, market forces determine the operations of the political economy in such a free association. However, the state has the responsibility of promoting the good of the commonwealth, and in order to do that, the state may intervene in a limited manner in the workings of the economy.

Finally, this is not a study of African political institutions, although institutions are the “theatre” of political action. In Africa, the key institutions tend to be informal patronage relations in which unwritten rules dictate political order and process. Instead, this study reinforces the scholarly tradition in African studies that underscores African agency and
responsibility. Many scholars in that tradition have argued that the post-colonial leaders of Africa inherited a political mess at independence, but that they have also been the main actors in the political theater where the majority of Africans have been ignored and manipulated. Postcolonial leaders have done this to promote their own personal and private ambitions. This study examines that agency on the part of postcolonial leaders and establishes the basis for optimism in the recovery of intersubjective relations.
CHAPTER 1

DEFINING THE HUMAN CRISIS IN AFRICA

But these things we can say because they are true . . . that in many instances, three decades of independence and self-rule have left behind a trail of despoliation and regression; that, in this period, the disparity in income and wealth has worsened not only between ourselves and the developed world, but also within many of our countries, between those who had the possibility to use access to power to enrich themselves at the expense of the rest, who are the wretched of the earth; that this parasitic growth on the African body-politic is driven by its own internal dynamic which aims at self-preservation, uninterrupted reproduction and continued domination.

Thabo Mbeki

The epigraph by Thabo Mbeki of South Africa mirrors my own reflections and arguments about the human condition in Africa. President Mbeki was reflecting W. E. B. Du Bois’s firm belief that race would be a dominant issue in the twentieth century and calls on Africans to affirm other realities about Africa and talk openly about Africa’s self-inflicted agony. Writing in the Atlantic Monthly in 1994, Robert Kaplan painted a disturbing picture of decline and civil war in Sierra Leone, stating that the picture he sketched reflected the decline that was sweeping the continent. Describing the political fate of the continent, Claude Ake argued that little changed with the proclamation of independence: “State power remained essentially the same: immense, arbitrary, often violent, always threatening . . . politics remained a zero-sum game; power was sought by all means and maintained by all means.”

In this chapter, I sketch the African crisis as the privatization of power, the pauperization of the state, the prodigalization of the state, and the proliferation of violence. These articulations, while malleable, serve as a hermeneutical device employed to provide a perspective on the African
state. It is a perspective that examines Africa’s responsibility for developments in the postcolonial state, while recognizing that negative historical manipulations from outside Africa have also shaped the postcolonial state.4

The Privatization of Power

I contend that central to the sociopolitical crisis in Africa is the political praxis politicians have employed to acquire, deploy, and concentrate power in the hands of a few elites, a practice described by Africanists as the “privatization of power.” By “privatization of power,” I mean, in a limited way, an exclusionary political praxis that has reserved political power and the spoils of power to a few self-anointed rulers.5

Postcolonial politics has given a new twist to power, which, according to Max Weber, “is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which Weber’s probability rests.”6 This view of power is influential because it highlights actors in social relations and the desires of those actors to impose their own will on the people. Weber also points out that members of “a social relationship” often contest and resist those who attempt to impose their will on other people. The idea here is that power is competitive and negotiable.7 In the African postcolony, many leaders have exerted their will, distorted legitimate authority, and deployed deadly force to hold on to power. The will to contest the excesses and aporias of power has been suppressed, often violently, weakening the negotiable and contestatory dimensions of power. Michel Foucault offers another perspective when he argues that power is not merely a commodity located in political institutions, but a reality entangled in the totality of human existence, part of “every point of social body, members of families or between every one who knows and every one who does not.”8 Foucault proposes a multiform view of power in relations of domination to reflect the dynamic and circulatory nature of power that resists simplistic commodification.9

Discourses of power in Africa probe people’s perception of power, who has what kind of power, how they acquired power, the nature and structures that legitimize power, the purposes and extent to which power is deployed, and the distribution of visible and invisible power. Government structures and investiture processes demonstrate visible power in politics, while invisible power may fall on a continuum that ranges from the proverbial power behind the throne to what Achille Mbembe has called the “ton-ton macoutisation” of state power.10 The leadership crisis in Africa which has been studied by Africanists and observers of political developments in Africa during the last three decades, demands an ongoing phenomenology

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