

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The carnality of power

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Abstract

In ‘Provisional notes on the postcolony’, Achille Mbembe argues that obscenity and grotesquery are essential characteristics of postcolonial regimes of domination and subordination. This article attempts to extend this insight for the study of contemporary African social formations. Drawing on examples from Central, Southern and West Africa, the article reflects on Mbembe’s particular emphasis on the *carnality of power*, especially power’s ability to (over-)carnalize social relations, by further demonstrating why this is useful for understanding the relations of domination and subordination in Africa.

Résumé

Dans ses « Notes provisoires sur la postcolonie », Achille Mbembe soutient que l’obscénité et le grotesque sont des caractéristiques essentielles des régimes de domination et de subordination postcoloniaux. Cet article tente d’étendre cette perspective pour l’étude des formations sociales africaines contemporaines. S’appuyant sur des exemples d’Afrique centrale, australe et occidentale, l’article se penche sur l’accent particulier que Mbembe place sur la *carnalité du pouvoir*, notamment l’aptitude du pouvoir à (sur-)carnaliser les relations sociales, en démontrant ensuite pourquoi cela est utile pour comprendre les relations de domination et de subordination en Afrique.

Carnality and spirituality: ‘the triple Ps of Zimbabwe’

... the postcolony is a world of anxious virility. (Mbembe 1992: 9)

In early 2014, Zimbabwe’s public sphere was seized by tabloid-style rumours about precarious virilities, involving the former prime minister, Morgan Tsvangirai, and the ‘miracle-working’ Pentecostal prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa. Regarding the former, Elizabeth Macheke, the estranged wife of Tsvangirai, the presidential candidate of the Movement for Democratic Change–Tsvangirai (MDC-T), ‘confirmed’ to *The Herald* that she was separated from him because of ‘sensitive personal issues’ (Maodza 2014) that only

the couple could resolve. Her statement was a 'confirmation' of an issue the public had 'known' and what the newspaper described, rather delicately, as 'a medical one'. The public jumped to the conclusion that the former prime minister was suffering from 'erectile dysfunctional disorder' – journalist and blogger Fungai Machirori would describe this in her interesting essay 'Of penises, politics and Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe' (subsequently, 'the triple Ps of Zimbabwe') as 'an exposé of trouble in the un-paradise that is Tsvangirai's love life' (2014).¹ Macheke was reported to have left her marital home while Tsvangirai was in Lagos visiting the (in)famous Nigerian megastar prophet T. B. Joshua, ostensibly for a spiritual cure for his double jeopardy: political and carnal virility.

As for Makandiwa, the founder of the popular United Family International Church (UFIC), it was reported that he had performed, at the New Year's Day service, a penis-enhancing miracle on a Namibian, whose private member was the size of a two-year-old's. The Namibian reportedly could not sustain his love life or find a wife because of his phallic deficiency. The prophet was said to have commanded the man's infantile private member, 'First month grow, second month grow, third month grow, fourth month grow, fifth month ummm stop.' The speculation was that the organ must have grown exponentially until the prophet decreed it to stop.²

In reflecting on 'the triple Ps of Zimbabwe' – a subject that 'enthralled' 'the general Zimbabwean populace' – and despite Tsvangirai's reassurance that he had no problem with his private member, Machirori stated:

As [the] prospects for political change continue to decline, it is the rise of Pentecostalism and tales of the supernatural that seem to have filled the void in the collective imagination of most Zimbabweans ... While a penis-enlarging miracle might seem like child's play ... it does epitomise the vulnerability of so many Zimbabweans who remain desperate for a change in their personal fortunes. Desperate for hope; for at least one pleasure, one relief. And the commonality of the desperation is compounded by Tsvangirai's pursuit of the same from TB Joshua. (Machirori 2014)

In a striking lay sociological reflection, Machirori concluded as follows:

Just think about Tsvangirai's case a bit more deeply, if you will. Here is a man, aged 61, married as many times as he has lost in his bid to become Zimbabwe's elected president (three), who makes a trek to a death-predicting spiritual leader³ in pursuit of answers and solutions to the problems beleaguering

¹ See the comment by Mrs Mukanya in response to the story in *The Herald*, 'Why I ditched Tsvangirai: wife' (Maodza 2014).

² It is surprising that neither the astute and humorous public commentator Machirori nor other news outlets in Zimbabwe wondered why Tsvangirai had to travel all the way to Nigeria to see Pastor Joshua since the Zimbabwean prophet Makandiwa was obviously a 'certified' curer of similar incapacities. Except, of course, if: (1) the latter was not skilled in simultaneously resolving Tsvangirai's twin problems – political and sexual virility; and (2) Tsvangirai's problem was less about size and more about dysfunction, as alleged.

³ T. B. Joshua had reportedly gained 'credibility' in Zimbabwe – and in Southern Africa in general before then – when, in 2012, he predicted the death of an African leader who was 'old and unwell'. So, when the Malawian leader Bingu wa Mutharika died, many believed that Joshua was 'spiritually powerful'. Yet, *The Herald* reported: 'It is understood that Mr Tsvangirai has tried to resolve his sensitive personal problem by consulting Prophet T. B. Joshua, meeting little to no success on that front' (Maodza 2014).

his personal and political aspirations. In a continuation of the comedy of errors that is his love life, he returns home to find his wife gone and, a few weeks later, speculations about his impotence all over the media. (Machirori 2014)

If such titillating tales of phallic inadequacies were not tragic reflections of everyday life and the nature of power in the postcolony, they would have been significant simply for the hilarity they provoked – except that, as Achille Mbembe has argued, the affinity between carnality and hilarity in postcolonial contexts is not a mere laughing matter,⁴ notwithstanding the fact that ‘obsession with orifices, odours and genital organs . . . dominate . . . popular laughter’ (Mbembe 1992: 6). But because obscenity, such as described above – and the related grotesquery – is not exclusively the province of ordinary people (‘non-official cultures’), as Bakhtin (1970) assumed, we need to pay greater attention to the ways in which obscenity can help explain the nature of power in the postcolony, wherever we find it among the dominant (in ‘official cultures’) – but particularly in the mutuality between ‘official’ and ‘non-official’ cultures. This is because, as Mbembe suggests, obscenity and grotesquery are essential characteristics of postcolonial regimes of domination and subordination – and subjection.⁵ There is an expectation, among both the dominant and the dominated, that the (African) man of power must display or exhibit his virility – particularly sexual virility.⁶ Tsvangirai’s dilemma – what Mbembe calls, in the nugget above, ‘anxious virility’ – was unlike that of ‘The Providential Guide’ in Sony Lab’ou Tansi’s *Life and a Half*,⁷ which Mbembe cites, who had suffered ‘a nasty blow from below’ due to old age but remained, despite his ‘momentary impotence’, ‘a dignified male, still even a male who could perform’ (Tansi 2011 [1979]: 42, cited in Mbembe 1992: 6). The ex-prime minister was believed to have suffered long-term impotence. Beyond the fact that obscenity is a key characteristic of postcolonial regimes of domination and subordination, Mbembe argues that particular instances of such manifestations constitute ‘active statements about the human condition, and as such contribute integrally to the making of political culture in the postcolony’ (*ibid.*: 7).

Against this backdrop, I reflect on Mbembe’s particular emphasis on what I call the *carnality of power*: that is, power’s ability to (over-)carnalize political and social relations – which, therefore, makes carnality ‘vital to understanding the dynamics of power’ (Povinelli 2012: 79), and, by doing so, reduces the *polis* to the ‘equivalent [of] a community of men’ (*société des hommes*) whose ‘psychic life is organized around a particular event: the swelling of the virile organ, the experience of turgescence’

⁴ In one of the many stories in Zimbabwean newspapers and online media about Tsvangirai and his paramours, *The Herald* published photographs of him ‘cavorting with a group of women’. These images ‘caused a social media frenzy with party functionaries tripping over each other to explain the incident . . . [In one of the photographs] Mr Tsvangirai is laughing while apparently watching the posterior of one of the women while the others are cheering’ (see Zindoga 2016).

⁵ As Judith Butler (1997: 2) notes, power as subjection involves a ‘double valence of subordinating and producing’.

⁶ Mbembe has argued elsewhere that, ‘[i]n the postcolony, power dons the face of virility’ (Mbembe 2006: 163).

⁷ He cites the original French edition, *La Vie et demie*.

(Mbembe 2006: 163). In reflecting on Mbembe's famous essay, I intend to accomplish three interrelated goals to reinterpret the essay on the carnality of *commandement*: (1) by extending its reach to contemporary times, noting its persistent value in accounting for the meshing of licit and illicit sexuality as part of the *licences* of power in the postcolony (and beyond); (2) by extending its reach to include homosexual relationships – which Mbembe did not emphasize and which, since the original essay was published, have been largely removed from under the cloak of silence in public discourse in many parts of the continent; and (3) by challenging Mbembe's assumption that those who laugh during instances of power's excess and buffoonery (particularly in the context of its carnality) are laughing *with* and not laughing *at* power.⁸

Why is carnality relevant for reflecting on power⁹ – and vice versa? In 'Provisional notes', Mbembe provides some key reasons that I reflect on in this article. Generally, 'Provisional notes' provides us not only with important means to reflect on the ways in which power literally penetrates the body, but also with the social and political implications of the ways in which the physical body (the carnal) and its (ab)uses are connected to the body politic. Here, I use the carnality of power to emphasize how power is instantiated by sex and sexual relations through attempts at, or actual instances of, copulation – precarious and unsolicited or desired and demanded – that are determined by relations of domination.¹⁰ Within a distinctive economy of desire and pleasure, which Jean-François Lyotard describes as 'libidinal economy' (1993 [1974]), *carnal power* habitually involves all-consuming and relentless efforts by the dominant to gain 'unfettered sexual access' (Stoler 2010 [2002]: xxii). While some scholars, such as Stoler (*ibid.*), approach carnality as a phenomenon that 'extend[s] beyond [relationships] grounded in sex',¹¹ in this article I focus only on relationships grounded in sex, particularly as dictated by the dominant person's constant thirst for sexualized bodies – and, of course, within specific formations of erotic economy (see Obadare 2020), including the ways in which the allure and ardour of power held by the dominant also foster erotic desires among the dominated.¹² The nature of this thirst often implies that this form of carnality would prompt violations of norms (of decency, for instance), rules and even laws, given that it is based

⁸ I thank one of the reviewers for pointing me towards the clarification of these points.

⁹ See Stoler for her take on 'what joined carnality to power' in nineteenth-century Dutch East Indies (2010 [2002]: 140).

¹⁰ This implies a suggestion, in paraphrasing Butler (1997: 3), that we need to think about the theory of power with a theory of the carnal.

¹¹ Stoler approaches carnality as something that 'is never only of the sexual as it is never only of the flesh' (2010 [2002]: xxv), while Povinelli describes it as 'the socially built space between flesh and environment'. The latter further distinguishes 'corporeality from carnality in terms of the difference between flesh as a juridical and political maneuver and flesh as a physical mattering forth of these maneuvers' (Povinelli 2006: 7). However, both agree on the links between power and carnality.

¹² The potentially eruptive and fatal nature of power and sex is further complicated – and therefore rendered more interesting for students of society – when money is thrown into the mix, as often occurs. What I call PMS (Power, Money and Sex) is the subject of an ongoing and more elaborate examination of complicated socialities.

fundamentally on unequal power.¹³ This is partly a consequence of the fact that power revels in infringements of the carnal autonomy or integrity of its targets. As a result, *carnal power*¹⁴ invites a surplus of rumours, gossip and suppositions about its complexion, aggression and transgressions.

I should clarify that by 'power' I do not mean the multidimensional leverage held and pressed into their own service only by those who are well placed in one way or another in the contemporary postcolony. I mean it, in the Foucauldian sense,¹⁵ as a strategy that is present in all spheres of social life, mobilized by both the dominant and the dominated, and in which the two are mutually complicit (Clegg *et al.* 2006: 254), as well as in the Mbembian sense as a phenomenon involving 'the nature of [both] domination and subordination' (Mbembe 1992: 4).

I focus on the carnality of power – or the carnal life of power – for a number of related reasons. One, I want to re-emphasize some critical perspectives in 'Provisional notes'. The first of these is Mbembe's characterization of the postcolony as a formation marked 'by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion' (1992: 3). This is important because, while things have changed significantly in Africanist scholarship¹⁶ since Mbembe's essay was published, the literature, in my view, still has not paid sufficient attention to the examination of the dilemmas and challenges of 'regular' politics on the continent through the lens of sexual excess – including the political (as well as social, cultural and economic) implications or consequences of lechery in high places. The second is the author's stress on the implications of 'illicit cohabitation' – the sharing of 'the same living space' by *commandement* and its 'subjects' – which, among other effects, leads to 'mutual zombification' (*ibid.*: 4). Thus, even while condemning or pretending to condemn the 'moral lapses' of the dominant, the dominated contribute directly or vicariously to promoting the *criticality*, if not the *supremacy*, of male virility in the contemporary postcolony by being in awe of it and/or by taking its transgressions for granted, and thus, implicitly or explicitly, cojoining (phallic) power and sexual potency. A man (especially a significant man) is expected to use his 'maleness well'¹⁷ – even when he does so in improper or corrupt ways in the context of the discharge of his formal duties. For instance, in Togo, President Gnassingbé Eyadéma's political as well as phallic power were captured in the popular

¹³ I disagree with Lyotard's conclusion, based on the 'dangerous liaison of Alcibiades with Socrates', that 'the circular organization of the desiring bodies in the *politeia* necessarily inscribes them into an equal exchange, equivalence' (1993 [1974]: 158–9).

¹⁴ It should be noted that such carnal power can be shared, in a very fluid and dynamic way, among the dominant as well as the dominated.

¹⁵ As with his work in general, Foucault approaches power as a complex phenomenon (1980: 56). One of the many dimensions of this complexity that he emphasizes is the 'investment of power in the body' (*ibid.*) that produces effects including those 'of pleasure against the moral norms of sexuality . . . [and] decency' (*ibid.*). Thus, because of the ironies, paradoxes, inversions or contradictions of power, 'what had made power strong' can suddenly be 'used to attack it' (*ibid.*).

¹⁶ For instance, there is now a robust literature on LGBTQ lives and communities in Africa as well as a wider embrace of this literature in mainstream Africanist scholarship than existed up until the late 1980s – including since the last decade of the twentieth century, when Mbembe's article was published.

¹⁷ I used this phrase in an interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in reflecting on the relationship between the Catholic priest and Kambili in her book *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). She responded: 'Using his maleness well? Ha. That is an oddly interesting expression that begs for deconstruction' (see Adebani 2020).

description of him as the ‘husband of all husbands’ (Toulabor 1994: 63). Thus, a man (especially a man in/of power, such as Tsvangirai) who either lacks *maleness* or fails to *use it well* is regarded by the dominant as well as by the dominated as effeminate – that is, not a *proper man*.¹⁸ The popular circulation of the *social legitimacy* and *licence* of sexual power, therefore, often means that, in what Jean-François Lyotard (1993 [1974]: 5) describes as ‘the accountancy in libidinal matters’,¹⁹ the *balance sheet* is almost always resolved in favour of the powerful, particularly the most powerful.

Further, as hinted above, a focus on this aspect of the ‘system of signs’, in what Mbembe describes as the concurrent ‘chaotic plurality’ and ‘internal coherence’ of the postcolony, reminds us of the need to expand the examination of the ‘*under-neath*’ of things, especially those that existing social ‘strategies of concealment’ (Ferre 2001: 1) prevent scholars from fully accessing, as well as those that we, as scholars, often avert our gaze from because they seem too lurid or prurient²⁰ for (‘elevated’ and ‘elevating’) social analysis.

Starting with ‘Provisional notes on the postcolony’, Mbembe has shown that the *order of things* in the postcolony sometimes only makes sense when we consider them alongside the *under of things*. Again, as he demonstrates in this important essay, African writers have never shied away from using the carnal to illustrate the realities of social life on the continent – with Sony Lab’ou Tansi as a good example. Against this backdrop, I want to show that, contrary to some of the criticisms that the author, in the ‘Provisional notes’, is unnecessarily ‘prurient’ in his analysis of the sex and sexuality of powerful men and the targets of their erotic interests, he was in fact not only encouraging Africanist scholarship to boldly engage in and with actually existing erotic relations – including in their lurid excess and abjection – but also forcing us to focus on such matters that were elided in different ways (such as through euphemisms, metaphors, etc.)²¹ both in actual social life in Africa and in the scholarly literature that described this social life. Perhaps one of the reasons why Africanist scholars, before Mbembe’s important essay, shied away from engaging

¹⁸ This might explain why people believe that Tsvangirai, who was linked to many women (including the two whom he married and at least two others with whom he had children), was ready to do anything to ‘regain’ his potency. *The Herald* claimed to have been ‘reliably informed that Mr Tsvangirai wanted to marry his late [first] wife Susan Mhundwa’s younger sister, Leah, and officially communicated this to Ms Macheke [his second wife] and his family. Mr Tsvangirai, the sources say, strongly believed marrying from the Mhundwa family would resolve the “sensitive personal issues” he is facing’ (Maodzwa 2014). For stories on Tsvangirai’s wives and the ‘[s]everal women [who] came forward to say they were having affairs with [him]’, see ‘Morgan Tsvangirai love secretes [sic] leaked’, *Taarifa*, 4 April 2008 <<https://taarifa.rw/morgan-tsvangirai-love-secretes-leaked/>>, Smith (2018) and Shoko (2012).

¹⁹ While Mbembe approaches the libidinal as social and political, Lyotard approaches it as part of the political economy.

²⁰ Such as, in Mbembe (1992: 6), ‘penis’, ‘erection’, ‘phallus’, ‘bottom’, ‘vaginal fluids’, ‘quivering thighs’, ‘bewitching arse’, and so on. It is noteworthy that Mbembe pleads that his focus on ‘the mouth, the belly or the phallus’ is not ‘in order to be automatically obscene’ (*ibid.*: 7). I recall a now late Nigerian political scientist, during an encounter at the CODESRIA tenth general assembly held in Kampala in December 2002, accusing Ebenezer Obadare (also a contributor to this issue of *Africa*) and me of *risking* following the ‘stupid tradition’ of Mbembe, ‘who writes about women’s bottoms, penises and such nonsense’.

²¹ See Machirori’s swipe at the public sphere in Zimbabwe, where most people failed to mention ‘penis’ in the reports and discussions about Tsvangirai’s ‘erectile dysfunction’ in the media.

with such matters was because of what Ann Laura Stoler (2010 [2002]: xv) describes as the ‘inaccessibility’ of ‘people’s affective and moral states’, although these *states* constitute ‘critical markers of [potentially] dangerous interior sensibilities in the arts of governance’. It is therefore significant that, since Mbembe’s piece was published, there has been a noticeable eagerness among a few scholars to embrace the discussion of *rumoured* and/or *actual* sexual encounters among the dominant and between the dominant and the dominated that have consequences for the ‘dramaturgy of power’ in Africa (for example, see Piot 2010).²² No doubt, ‘Provisional notes’ was one of the first scholarly African works in the second half of the twentieth century to encourage us to reckon with the fact that sex and sexuality, being matters of ‘concern, surveillance and control’, as Foucault (1980: 57) describes it, can be ‘object[s] of analysis’ – particularly in the lurid way in which they are (mis)used in the postcolony.

Finally, I hope to use this reinterpretation of Mbembe to dismiss one of the ‘unhelpful oppositions’ in Africanist scholarship in the era in which he published the essay – which he failed to mention specifically – between *licit* and *illicit* sexuality.²³ This is partly because the carnal practices examined here, following Mbembe, are not ‘aberrant, exceptional excesses’ (Stoler 2010 [2002]: xvii) of domination in the postcolony; rather, they are common and recurrent, and therefore provide the grist for quotidian operations of power.

On the whole, Mbembe alerts us to how the dominated approve and at the same time disapprove of the sexual liaisons of the dominant; in fact, they expect that men of power must also possess sexual power, which can be – should be, and in some cases *must* be – staged or displayed in a number of ways, including the licentious. The more power those who are dominant have, the more tolerant are the dominated of their licentiousness – as the example of Donald Trump and his millions of worshippers in the *ur-postcolony*, the USA,²⁴ reminds us.

Paramours and paramourcy

[T]he acerbic [politician] Jonathan Moyo famously wrote that [Prime Minister] Tsvangirai approaches every issue with a shut mind and every woman with an open zip. (Gappah 2012)

The emphasis on orifices and protuberances has to be understood in relation to two factors especially. The first derives from the fact that the *commandement* in the postcolony has a marked taste for lecherous living. (Mbembe 1992: 6)

²² I use some of the already published examples below.

²³ As an instrument – phallogocentric, colonial, imperial, etc. – of governing desire, the constraints historically imposed on sexuality to determine what sexual practices are allowed or disallowed are one of the most critical forms of power in ancient and contemporary society. For some fascinating analyses of such contexts and logics of governing desire historically and globally, see Clark (2019), and, for Nigeria, see Aderinto (2014). Ruggiero’s analysis of the evolution of both licit and illicit sexuality in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Venice is also illuminating (1985).

²⁴ The idea that the USA is itself a postcolony with a cultural complexity ‘that we should analyse through postcolonial reading strategies’ (Schueller 2004: 164) has been raised by some scholars, such as Bill Ashcroft *et al.* (1989). Others who have reflected on this include Jenny Sharpe (1995).

In 2012, as Tsvangirai struggled to wind up President Robert Mugabe's seemingly interminable reign in order to become Zimbabwe's second president, *The Guardian* in the UK published an important piece about him. In the story entitled 'Morgan Tsvangirai's messy love life is a gift to his enemies', after listing the prime minister's many marriages and dalliances, the paper commented:

But how much does all this matter? *For the most part, Zimbabweans don't particularly care about the private lives of politicians.* President Mugabe and his wife Grace began their relationship with an affair when both were married to other partners. *Cabinet ministers routinely jump in and out of multiple beds, and Zimbabwe gives a collective shrug.* This debacle matters for different reasons. It raises, once again, questions about the prime minister's judgment and fitness for office. Even his allies are lining up to speak out. *The Independent*, a leading business weekly, asked the question: is he fit to govern, while veteran journalist Geoff Nyarota encouraged Tsvangirai to have regard for the dignity of his office. Certainly, his multiple, and, apparently, simultaneous, sexual relationships with partners who appear to have been subject to no vetting not only demonstrates his extremely poor judgment, they also raise security concerns. He has made it woefully easy for his enemies to portray him as a sex-crazed maniac. (Gappah 2012, emphasis added in italics)

This story exemplifies Mbembe's point about the paradox in the attitudes of both the dominant and the dominated to the carnality of power. The dominated are appalled by the sexual excesses of the dominant when they are revealed and at the same time applaud, tolerate, ignore and/or *understand* them – including joking about them. Thus, resistance and passivity, autonomy and subjection constitute concurrent rather than distinct responses to carnal domination. Consequently, the banality of power is particularly expressive in the way in which people would sometimes 'travesty the metaphors meant to glory state power' (Mbembe 1992: 6) by deploying words and phrases that carnalize power in (dis)praise of the supreme leader.

In the different types of reaction to the carnality of power, what is important is the way in which these reactions hint at or capture people's reflections on power in the postcolony. The fact that the laughter provoked by the carnality of power suggests a certain popular ambivalence about the weaponization of the private member of those who are dominant does not provide us with the material to predict resistance or passivity. Rather, it furnishes us with evidence of the prevailing cultural attitudes that constitute useful subtexts to the discourses as well as the struggles for power. This is why the *irony* of particular instances of the concurrent praise and censure of carnal power through humour, *pace* Mbembe, should attract greater social analysis in the postcolony.

Of Zuma and Zapiro: carnality and hilarity

[T]he body in question is firstly a body that eats and drinks, and secondly a body that is open – in both ways. Hence the significance given to orifices and the central part they play in people's political humour. (Mbembe 1992: 7)



Figure 1. ‘Rape of Lady Justice’ – Zapiro’s controversial cartoon. © 2008–2017 Zapiro. Republished with permission. For more Zapiro cartoons, visit <<https://www.zapiro.com/>>.

A controversial cartoon in the Johannesburg *Sunday Times* of 7 September 2008 by South Africa’s award-winning cartoonist Zapiro (real name Jonathan Shapiro) (Figure 1) caused an uproar and placed the cartoonist ‘in the firing line’ (Van Hoorn 2008). In the cartoon, popularly called ‘Rape of Lady Justice’, African National Congress (ANC) leader Jacob Zuma loosens his trousers while his political allies hold down a woman wearing a sash saying ‘Justice System’, with her scales on the floor beside her. The Zuma allies include Julius Malema (then the leader of the ANC Youth League), Gwede Mantashe (one of the key leaders of the ANC), Blade Nzimande (the general secretary of the South African Communist Party or SACP) and Zwelinzima Vavi (general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions or COSATU). Mantashe says to Zuma: ‘Go for it boss!’

There is hardly a more apt or more popular demonstration of what Mbembe, in the epigram above, describes as ‘the significance given to orifices and the central part they play in people’s political humour’ in the postcolony than this cartoon.²⁵ Acknowledging the ‘massive reaction’ to the cartoon, both laudatory and condemnatory, Zapiro told the *Mail & Guardian Online* that this was ‘[p]erhaps the biggest reaction ever in the shortest space of time’ (Van Hoorn 2008). The ANC, SACP and ANC Youth League not only dismissed the cartoon as ‘disgusting’ and one that ‘borders on defamation of character’, they reported the cartoonist to the South African Human

²⁵ In 2013, BuzzFeed rated it as one of the ‘15 historic cartoons that changed the world’ (see <<https://www.buzzfeed.com/victornavasky/15-historic-cartoons-that-changed-the-world>>). For Zapiro’s other relevant cartoons on Zuma, see Zapiro and Willis (2018).

Rights Commission, accusing him of 'hate speech'. Zuma also sued Zapiro for £700,000 (Laing 2010) but later withdrew the case. What gives rise to such conflict as this over a cartoon, argues Mbembe, 'is not the . . . reference to the genitals of the men in power but rather the way in which people by their laughter kidnap power and force it, as if by accident, to examine its own vulgarity' (Mbembe 1992: 8).

Many praised the cartoon for capturing the spirit of 'the rape of institutions' – particularly the justice system. 'He [Zuma] is raping the justice system,' adds Zapiro, 'and they [Zuma's political allies] are complicit in that' (Van Hoorn 2008). Perhaps what made the cartoon more hilarious for some and more hideous for others was that Zuma had faced trial for rape. Therefore, in this case, while Zapiro insisted that rape was a metaphor for what Zuma and his constituents were doing to the justice system, Zuma and his supporters saw this cartoon as constituting a literal accusation of rape – although Zuma had been acquitted two years earlier (see Hammett 2010).²⁶ The reactions that this cartoon elicited again demonstrate the attitude of many people to what is often regarded as an issue of male virility – even in grave circumstances of rape allegations. Pierre de Vos, a constitutional law professor at the University of Western Cape, ordinarily a 'great fan' of Zapiro, wondered if the cartoon was not 'immoral and ethically deeply problematic' and 'asked whether Shapiro was undermining respect for the judiciary he was purportedly defending, by suggesting subliminally that Zuma should have been convicted in the rape trial'. He also suggested that Zapiro might be "cheapening" the horror of the act [rape] and helping to *desensitise* people' (SAPA 2008, emphasis added). But many people disagreed with de Vos, with one stating: 'It is time someone drew attention to the shocking behaviour of these political figureheads and their most avid supporters' (*ibid.*).

Indeed, the sketch seems to condense the long-running public discourses of lechery around Zuma. As a polygamist, he had not only married six times and had at least three wives at a certain point during his presidency (three by official accounts, more in public discourse),²⁷ he allegedly had between twenty and twenty-two children from his spouses and other lovers (Head 2017) and was often reported to have had sex with other women. Thus, in the estimation of his critics, despite having been acquitted of the charge of having raped his friend's daughter, Zuma's image as a libidinous leader festered. The woman he was acquitted of raping was an HIV-positive AIDS activist. Zuma, who claimed that the sex was consensual, admitted that he did not use a condom, but added that 'he had showered afterwards to cut the risk of contracting the infection' (Peta 2008). While many of Zuma's supporters found his response funny, Zapiro decided to challenge the levity implied in such hilarity by subsequently putting a showerhead on Zuma's head in every subsequent cartoon in which he featured. Such was the scale of support that Zuma received from his supporters that not only was the home of the woman who accused him of rape

²⁶ See SAPA (2008). In the suit that he filed against Zapiro, Zuma stated that the cartoon 'damaged his reputation, was degrading and left him feeling humiliated' (see Chelemu 2010).

²⁷ Tom Head, writing in *The South African* against the background of allegations of corruption (called 'state capture'), accused Zuma, as president, of having 'perfected *wife capture* long before he's mastered *state capture*'. He added that 'Jacob Zuma has got married six times, proving that anything Henry VIII can do, he can do without beheading anyone' (Head 2017, emphasis added).

burned down, with further threats to 'burn the bitch' – which forced her and her mother to seek asylum in the Netherlands (Thamm 2016) – but Zuma was subsequently elected as the leader of the ANC and, following that, as president of South Africa.²⁸

In reflecting on this combination of levity and gravity, of lightness and seriousness – as in the Zuma/Zapiro case examined here – which is mirrored in what the sociologist Ebenezer Obadare describes as a 'state of travesty' (2010), Mbembe asks if 'it [is] enough to say that the postcolonial subject, as a *homo ludens*, is simply making fun of the *commandement*, making it an object of derision, as would seem to be the case if we were to apply Bakhtin's categories' (1992: 7). He states that while such 'outbursts of ribaldry and derision are actually taking the official world seriously, at face value or at least at the value officialdom itself gives it', what matters is to realize that 'the purest expression of *commandement* is conveyed by a total lack of restraint,²⁹ by a great delight too in getting really dirty. Debauchery and buffoonery readily go hand in hand' (*ibid.*).

However, contrary to Mbembe's conclusion that within the 'postcolonial mode of domination' obscene laughter constitutes evidence of 'a practice of conviviality and a stylistic of connivance' (1992: 22), Zapiro's cartoons point to obscene laughter *against* – not *with* – regimes of domination (Werbner 2020: 288).³⁰

His Sex-cellery: the African head of state

The proclivity of power for *active* and ceaseless *carnal knowledge*, when it eventuates in gruesome outcomes – particularly for the reviled man of power – provides relief for its victims. Anyone who doubts the potential liberating powers of carnality should ask Nigerians. In June 1998, they were liberated from the clutches of a murderous dictatorship by the general's carnal proclivities – at least, so many believed. When General Sani Abacha, Nigeria's dictator, suddenly gave up the ghost on 8 June 1998, much of the country celebrated the end of the most vicious regime in the country's history. The suddenness of his death and the official announcement that Abacha had died as a result of a heart attack led most people to suspect foul play. In no time, rumour circulated in urban areas of Nigeria that the reclusive general had lapsed on the laps of 'Indian prostitutes'. Before he died, Abacha's taste for oriental paramours was the stuff of elite gossip in Nigeria. As the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria – who were particular targets of his homicidal rule – would say, Abacha had exited from 'a door similar to the one from whence he came to the world'. This cultural take, in addition to the rumours that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), allegedly working in

²⁸ The threats of injury or actual injury against women who accuse powerful men of sexual assault are not uniquely African – as the experiences of women who accused President Donald Trump of sexual assault clearly show.

²⁹ To give yet another example of this, one prominent and 'internationally respected' West African president was famous for breaking meetings – even abroad – to have a 'quickie' with his countless paramours. As one of the top officials in his government once told me, this worried some in intelligence circles in Western nations so much that they gave 'hints' to other leaders in the country to ask him to desist.

³⁰ Werbner (2020: 300) readily suggests this. See also Bayart (1993: 293) on 'postcolonial derision and hollow laughter'.

concert with other major intelligence agencies in the West and with Abacha's adversaries, had decided to take the despot out through his sexual proclivities, seems to capture Mbembe's elaboration of the intrinsic danger of *carnal knowledge*³¹ in his response to the critics of *On the Postcolony*. He argues that, when power grows towards its limits, the phallus as effigy plays 'a spectral function'. Thus, 'in seeking to exceed its own boundaries, the body of power (the phallus) exposes its limits, and in exposing them, exposes itself and renders itself vulnerable' (Mbembe 2006: 163).

Although the salacious details of Abacha's death were never officially confirmed, the fact that he and his close friend and fellow soldier General Jeremiah Useni, Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja – and (in)famously called 'Jerry Boy' – had been with some Indian 'prostitutes'³² late into the night before he died was reported by both local and foreign press (Orr 1998; Weiner 1998). A Western official in Nigeria told *The New York Times*, 'We've heard rumours that General Abacha was poisoned while drinking juice, carousing with young women, eating an apple,³³ even experimenting with Viagra'³⁴ (Weiner 1998). Another diplomat told the *Irish Times*: 'This was something he did regularly.³⁵ He went there [the guest house] to meet two Indian girls in the morning of June 8th and that is where he was poisoned' (Orr 1998).

Whether true or not, what is important is that Nigerians believed that they were saved from his autocracy and the likely breakup of the country by 'Indian prostitutes'. Rumours circulated about how the CIA, working with some elements within the Nigerian military, either gave the Indians what they used to spike Abacha's drink or provided the 'special condoms' that Abacha used and which slowly killed him.³⁶

³¹ The female sexual organ is also imagined as an instrument of *disciplinarity*, one that carries a special form of penalty for violators of social norms. In this context, Mbembe (2006: 164) has argued that '[t]he vagina . . . came to be construed at times as a container . . . as an envelope, or a sheath whose function it was not only to enfold, but also to discipline the excess and immoderation of the penis'.

³² Some reports mentioned three prostitutes, others two (see Orr 1998; Weiner 1998). I was reliably informed by a senior police officer who interrogated the young women that there were only two. He added that it was not the first time that these women had been flown into Nigeria for 'sex-capades' with Abacha. *The New York Times* and *Irish Times*, among others, reported that Abacha might have been poisoned by disaffected military officers using the young women – through a 'spiked' drink, the apple he ate, or the Viagra he was said to have used (see Orr 1998; Weiner 1998).

³³ In the rumour mill in Nigeria, the metaphor of the 'Indian apple' that Abacha ate and that led to his death perhaps had a background in the biblical narrative of the 'fall of man'.

³⁴ Abacha's friend General Jeremiah Useni and the dictator's powerful chief security officer, Major Hamza Al-Mustapha, denied that Abacha died after a sex romp or that there were Indian girls with him that night, although the former confirmed that he was with Abacha in the guest house – notorious for sexual orgies by Nigerian leaders – between 10 p.m. and 2.30 a.m. Abacha died around 5 a.m. (see Ajani 2010; Opelobi 2017).

³⁵ This statement exemplifies Mbembe's argument – using Tansi's words – that one way of exercising authority in the postcolony is 'to pass most of one's time in "pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls"' (Tansi 1988 [1983]: 98, cited in Mbembe 1992: 9).

³⁶ As head of state, Abacha had a special loathing for the USA that surprised some of those who knew him well. Incidentally, a highly credible top Nigerian and international diplomat told me in 1999 that when he met Abacha at the height of his regime's diplomatic squabbles with the USA, who were requesting the release of General Olusegun Obasanjo, former head of state, and Moshood Abiola, the winner of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, who were both in jail, Abacha refused and said: 'I know the Americans will come for me, but they will have to get me inside the villa.'

Whatever the real cause of Abacha's demise, partly because he was such a detested dictator, Nigerians responded to the rumoured cause of death of a man noted for his 'highly uncontrolled libido'³⁷ with ribaldry. The most common remark was about the 'Indian apple' that 'Abacha bit to death'. A related one was that he 'sang "Indian waka"³⁸ to hell'. Such play on what was assumed to be Abacha's lechery and the laughter elicited among the direct and indirect victims of his despotism by the rumoured manner of his death are, as Mbembe would have it, a way of 'reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of [Abacha's] *commandement*' (1992: 8).

Certainly, in sexual matters, Abacha was not unique among Nigerian leaders, although he was the only one who is believed to 'have died on top of a woman' – something considered to be the worst form of death within Nigeria's phallogocentric cultural world.³⁹ For instance, Major Debo Basorun, the former aide to military President Ibrahim Babangida, described how, during a state visit to France, the First Lady, Maryam, physically assaulted the general on suspicion that he had used the excuse of an official meeting that lasted till the early hours of the morning for a 'tryst' (Basorun 2013: 222). When Maryam, who was pummeling her husband, eventually opened the door of their hotel suite to allow in a senior military officer who had been summoned by aides to break up the fight, Basorun reports that what they 'saw was beyond comprehension': 'There he was – Nigeria's military top dog panting and sweating profusely in his roughened service dress with some buttons already ripped off' (*ibid.*: 222). Basorun, who was one of the closest aides to Babangida before they fell out (which forced him to flee Nigeria), alleges that Maryam was never able to directly catch her husband with other women, because he 'was always a step ahead', but she relied on other cues to provoke a reaction. On this occasion, she 'allegedly sniffed some strange perfume on her husband's body which led to accusations of infidelity' (*ibid.*: 221).

What is important about this example is not the truth of the military president's alleged infidelities, but the effect that the private, marital frictions over infidelities between 'His Military Highness' and his powerful wife (who was described by a news magazine as an 'empress'⁴⁰) had on the performance of the former's public duties. In this instance, because of the fight, Babangida arrived late for an early morning official event in France (Basorun 2013: 222). As Basorun states: 'Babangida's occasional squabbles with [his] wife always had an impact on his official productivity. His good and bad days could be as a result of such incident[s] and only close aides with access to the family could hazard a guess as to the cause' (*ibid.*). The First Lady's 'lack of inhibition' in discussing her husband's alleged adultery and their 'marital hitches' with others, the ex-aide adds, trumped Babangida's 'love for secrecy' (*ibid.*).

As the cases of Abacha and Zuma – and, to some extent, Babangida – show, the lecherous leader, whom I have captured here as *His Sex-cellency*, is not only a common

³⁷ See Shoaga (2013).

³⁸ 'Indian waka', by Lagos musician Abeni Salawa, was a popular song in south-western Nigeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

³⁹ I thank Katrien Pype for alerting me to the fact that, in Kinshasa (DRC), 'such a death is (jokingly) said to be the best death!'

⁴⁰ 'Making of an empress: Soyinka's attack on Maryam', *The African Guardian*, 16 November 1992.

phenomenon in the postcolony; also, the lechery, with the connivance of the dominated, has been normalized. In fact, as Mbembe notes, 'The unconditional [sometimes *conditional*] subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one of the pillars upholding the reproduction of the phallographic system' (1992: 9).

However, some of the (potential) victims of this system employ different means of escape from the unrelenting libidinous threats of the head of state. Charles Piot discusses the Togolese experience, where President Eyadéma uses carnality as a 'strategy of control'. 'Eyadéma made a habit of sleeping with the wives of male ministers (and, needless to say, with those few female ministers he appointed),' writes Piot (2010: 25). This practice, he adds, is 'clearly rooted in power politics as much as in the sexual appetite of the dictator.' One minister who had an 'especially attractive' wife was said to have ensured that Eyadéma never set his lecherous eyes on her (*ibid.*).⁴¹ The late Zairean dictator and kleptocrat, Mobutu Sese Seko, was also infamous for his sexual appetite, including rumours that he 'fathered illegitimate children with [Bobi] Lawada's [his second wife's] twin sister' (Taylor 2011). He married Bobi, who was his mistress, following the death of his wife, and then 'made her twin sister [Kosia] his new mistress'. It is reported that he 'joked [with] diplomats on asking whether they met his wife only to say when they said yes that they met his mistress and twin of his wife'.⁴² In 'Provisional notes', such practices of phallicism that ignore 'the array of interdictions surrounding copulation' (Mbembe 2006: 167), as displayed by Eyadéma and Mobutu, are described as 'violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness' and 'the loss of any limits or sense of proportion' (Mbembe 1992: 14, 17). Also, such 'policies' constitute reflections of the 'unlimited rights' of those in positions of authority 'over those under them'. Mbembe is succinct in noting that these 'rights' 'exempt acts of copulation from inclusion in the category of what is "shameful"' (*ibid.*: 23). Like Eyadéma, a Nigerian head of state is alleged to have slept with most of the women in his first cabinet. It was said that he took exception to one of his female ministers who was a concubine of his deputy, asking her, 'Why go for *number two* when *number one* is available to you?'⁴³

'Inappropriate intimacies' as family affairs

President Olusegun Obasanjo is one of the most internationally respected leaders in Africa. Apart from being a two-time head of state – and two-term president – of Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, he also claims to be a 'born-again' Christian. In fact, after he finished his term as president, he registered at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and received a PhD in Christian theology in 2017 (Kayode-Adedeji 2017). Although allegations of his affairs with several women

⁴¹ This happens in other countries on the continent. Apart from the perverse *sexual aggrandizement* that men in power derive from sleeping with the wives of subordinates – friends and adversaries alike – there is also a ritual dimension to this practice in some contexts. However, this is beyond the remit of this article.

⁴² 'Dangerous dictators: Mobutu Sese Seko', *Searching in History*, 4 May 2015.

⁴³ One of the aides of the deputy head of state told me this story after introducing me to the lady minister in Abuja, Nigeria. Again, in his response to his critics, Mbembe (2006: 168) points to the desire for 'surplus pleasure' as the 'object of power', adding that, '[a]mong men, this surplus pleasure operates via the fantasy of "consuming" as many women as possible'.

were common,⁴⁴ many people were shocked when, in January 2018, his first son, Gbenga, ‘dropped a bombshell’, as Sahara Reporters described it, about his father’s alleged ‘sexual intimacy with his wife, Moji’.⁴⁵ In an affidavit he submitted to the court in a bitter divorce case, the son of the former president stated that ‘he knows for a fact that the respondent committed adultery [incest?] with and had an intimate, sexual relationship with his own father, General Olusegun Obasanjo, in order to get contracts from the government’ (*ibid.*). In the affidavit, the estranged husband claimed that Moji was given lucrative oil contracts by her father-in-law in return for sexual favours (Last 2008).

Although Moji denied the allegations, the marriage was eventually dissolved the following year. While the allegations of incest and incestuous adultery made headlines in the newspapers both in Nigeria and abroad, it was significant that President Obasanjo never responded to them. He carried on with his public life as if nothing was amiss. He didn’t seem to lose any of his social or political standing either in Nigeria or abroad over this. He continued to preach in churches and to make a show of being a ‘born-again’ Christian. Was this because most people didn’t believe the allegations or that they didn’t care? Did Obasanjo consider the allegations damaging? If so, why didn’t he deny them publicly? Could it be because he knew that it would have no effect on his reputation anyway?

When asked about the allegations, the man who was foisted on the ruling party by Obasanjo as the national chair, Dr Ahmadu Ali, told the press that ‘the sex scandal rocking the former first family is entirely’ a ‘family affair’, thus ignoring the ‘various commentators [who] have called on the PDP to expel Obasanjo from the party’.⁴⁶ There are several other urban legends about Obasanjo and women in Nigeria⁴⁷ – one even made it into the diplomatic cables from the American embassy in Nigeria to the State Department in Washington DC, as revealed by WikiLeaks. *NEXT* newspaper published the story of the 19 October 2007 cable from the US chargé d’affaires, which detailed ‘the different contending groups pulling and pushing for the soul of the ruling People’s Democratic Party’, in which the first female speaker of the House of Representatives, Mrs Patricia Etteh, was mentioned as not only ‘a member of the former president’s network [in the ruling] PDP, but also ... Mr Obasanjo’s girlfriend’ (Akinbajo 2011). The ‘dubious rise’ of the woman, described by the American diplomat as a ‘former hairdresser [and] romantic interest of Obasanjo’, in becoming the number four citizen of Nigeria was ‘believed ... [to be] on the back of Mr Obasanjo’. When *NEXT* contacted Etteh – who was forced to resign from her position as speaker due to allegations of corruption about four months after she was elected – she reportedly told the newspaper, ‘I don’t bloody

⁴⁴ In her book, *Bitter-Sweet: my life with Obasanjo* (2008), Obasanjo’s first wife, Oluremi, accused him of being a serial philanderer. See also ‘Obasanjo’s women’, *TheNEWS*, 10 November 2008.

⁴⁵ ‘My father made love to my wife – Gbenga Obasanjo’, Sahara Reporters, 13 January 2008 <<http://saharareporters.com/2008/01/13/my-father-made-love-my-wife-%E2%80%94gbenga-obasanjo>>. Gbenga also alleged in the affidavit that his wife had confessed to him that her father had sexually abused her as a young woman.

⁴⁶ ‘Obasanjo’s sex scandal – it is their family affair, says Ahmadu Ali’, *Leadership*, 27 January 2008 <<https://allafrica.com/stories/200801280507.html>>.

⁴⁷ A former highly placed public official who was very close to Obasanjo once told me how, as president, he allegedly joked with him about what happens with ‘anything below his navel’.

care. I can have romantic interest with anybody. I am free to romance anybody' (*ibid.*) Perhaps Obasanjo will write about these accusations in another memoir – since he didn't mention them in his three-volume memoir published after he left office. But, given the way in which everyone – perhaps with the exception of Gbenga, and maybe Moji – moved on, particularly after the allegations about his daughter-in-law, one can suggest that the 'mutual zombification' of the dominant and the dominated has so normalized obscenity and grotesquery such that, in the end, even (allegations of) aberrant carnalities or 'inappropriate intimacies' (Stoler 2010 [2002]: xv) do not disrupt the people's estimation of the powerful or interrupt their public lives. Although such scandals may 'stub the toe' of the dominant, as Mbembe (1992: 10) observes, he 'glides unperturbed over them'. Thus, in the postcolony, the 'taste for lecherous living', 'the total lack of restraint' and 'a great delight ... in getting really dirty', to use Mbembe's phrases, do not seem to effectively destroy the 'reputations' of the dominant.

Yet, such a theory of carnal sovereignty based on popular expectations of male virility, particularly in figures of authority, must recognize the limits of the excess of carnal power. Contrary to Mbembe's conclusion about the relationship between power's excess and humour in the postcolony, complicity on the part of the dominated does not imply absolute loss of agency and critique. Thus, while they are implicated in licensing power's sexual transgressions, the dominated retain a critical measure of distance through their capacity to laugh *at* (and not *with*) expressions of the carnality of power. As Zapiro's Zuma cartoons and Eyadéma's case show, regular people retain the power of humour as a critique of the carnality of power. Therefore, complicity is never complete. Among the dominated, there is always a space to deride carnal power.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this article is extend Mbembe's insight on a particular characteristic of *commandement* in the postcolony: that is, its 'tendency to excess and a lack of proportion' (1992: 3), especially as this manifests in *commandement's* 'marked taste for lecherous living' (*ibid.*: 6). I have provided further examples of why this insight is useful for reflecting on the confluence of the political and the erotic. In examining how power 'animate[s] and enflish[es]'⁴⁸ – to use Povinelli's (2006: 3) instructive phrase – I have tried to make a supplementary contribution to Mbembe's study of how, in the postcolony, power regards carnality as a way of distributing, if not sharing, life with the gendered *other*⁴⁹ (cf. Povinelli 2006: 3).

In closing, I will make three points. First, reflecting on *commandement's* preoccupation with the sexual is not a judgement on the private lives of the specific people who are dominant in postcolonial contexts. This perspective does not necessarily pronounce them as morally wretched, although they may be. As Mbembe states,

⁴⁸ Mbembe characterizes this as 'the overabundant life of the flesh' (1992: 23).

⁴⁹ This 'sharing' could include both heterosexual and homosexual 'sharing'. As Katrien Pype has pointed out, in Kinshasa it is common practice for a man who wants a well-paying job in one of the telephone companies to be willing to engage in homosexual sex. The issue of gender in relation to *sharing* carnality within popular modes of masculinity in connection with excess is a matter that can be taken up in further research.

the 'notion of obscenity has no moral connotation here' (1992: 14). Thus, when obscenity is 'regarded as more than a moral category', we are able to employ it in the analysis of 'the modalities of power in the postcolony'. This is important because one of the most productive ways of studying 'the forces of tyranny in black Africa' is 'within the confines of ... intimacy' (*ibid.*: 29).

Second, perhaps as a reflection of the period in Africanist scholarship in which he published his essay, Mbembe concentrated exclusively on heterosexual relationships in describing obscenity and grotesquery (see also Pype 2022). However, I do not think that Mbembe, by doing so, was engaging in heteronormative analysis. As two of the most important *coups d'état* in Nigeria have shown, the dominant's homosexual relations (real or alleged) can also be the basis of particular forms of reactions to *commandement*. Although homosexuality has always been criminalized in Nigeria (first as 'sodomy' in the colonial and early postcolonial eras, and, since 2014, under the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which banned gay marriage and same-sex 'amorous relationships'), many believe that it is only the powerful who are able to 'enjoy' homosexual or bisexual lives without let or hindrance – though mostly in secret.⁵⁰ Homosexuality was first forced into the political space in Nigeria in 1966 when, in the broadcast announcing the overthrow of Nigeria's first post-independence government, the coup plotters stated that homosexuality, among other offences, would be 'punishable by death sentence' (see Adegbija 1995). It has since been rumoured that this was directed at the highest levels of political power in Nigeria at this point. There were suggestions that it was impossible to belong to some of the most exclusive political and military cliques in certain parts of Nigeria without being bisexual. The rumours gained greater credence twenty-four years later – that is, in 1990. In announcing what turned out to be an abortive coup, Major Gideon Orkar accused General Ibrahim Babangida of running not only a 'dictatorial, drug-baronish ... deceitful' government, but also 'a homosexually-centred' administration (*ibid.*). Therefore, it is useful to go beyond heterosexual relations in reflecting on *commandement*, in relation to what Mbembe describes as the 'obsession with orifices, odours and genital organs', given that, at both elite and mass levels, people 'wield concepts of femininity, masculinity, and homophobia (heteronormativity) as tools' (Sperling 2015: 2) of politics, particularly because of the 'accessibility and resonance' of these as aspects of 'popular cultural production' that 'makes the assertion of masculinity a vehicle for power' (*ibid.*: 3, 4, emphasis in the original) possible.

Third, as Mbembe insisted, examining such manifestations of 'the tropicalities of His Excellency' (1992: 6) as I have done here does not mean that this is an exclusive African (postcolonial) phenomenon. Thus, these examples of the carnality of power do not constitute, as he says, an 'aspect of a rather crude, primitive culture. Rather, I would argue that ... [they constitute] classical ingredients in the production of power, and that there is nothing specifically African about it' (*ibid.*: 6). As the infamous

⁵⁰ For a very useful discussion of 'how colonial-era anthropologists tended to suppress, minimize or exoticize evidence of [same-sex and bisexual] practices in conformity with colonial ideologies' in the first half of the twentieth century and beyond, see Eprecht (2006).

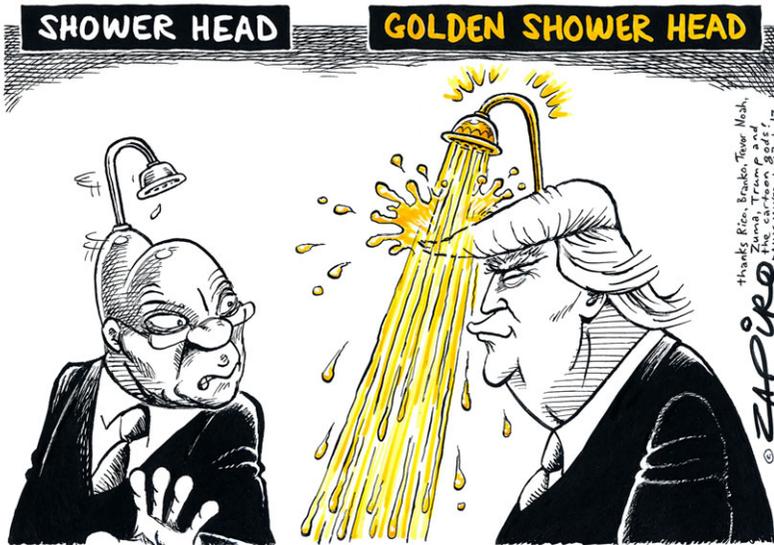


Figure 2. Birds of a shower: Zapiro's take on Trump's alleged 'golden shower' in relation to Zuma's 'shower' claims. © 2008–2017 Zapiro. Republished with permission.

examples of (allegations of) lecherous relationships involving presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump⁵¹ and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (of the notorious 'Bunga Bunga' case)⁵² show, there is nothing *tropical* about the carnality of power. In fact, the correlation – or mutuality, in some cases – between carnality and power is what is fundamentally at stake here, as Zapiro also illustrates in a '(golden) showerhead' cartoon pointing to the 'affinity' between Zuma and Trump (Figure 2).

While the postcolonial manifestations of such a correlation may follow a particular trajectory, the fact that Trump *grabbed* and continues to *grab* power and influence (over a substantial percentage of Americans), even in the context of his self-advertised proclivity for *grabbing* female genitalia, reminds us of the constant lecherous potential of power everywhere. For such men of power, to use Lyotard's words, 'There is no libidinal dignity, nor libidinal fraternity, there are [only] libidinal contacts' (1993 [1974]: 113). Here, like Mbembe in 'Provisional notes', I have demonstrated only the specific manifestations of the carnality of power in the postcolony, especially given the low level of institutionalization in such states that emerged from colonization.

⁵¹ Perhaps Trump's most infamous lecherous statement was in the *Access Hollywood* tape. In another context, when he was accused by Florida senator Marco Rubio of having small hands, he responded: 'And he referred to my hands if they're small, *something else* must be small. I guarantee you there's no problem. I guarantee you' (see Glass 2016, emphasis added).

⁵² Slavoj Žižek (2009: 49–50) argues that Berlusconi – whom he described as 'a clown without dignity' – 'systematically undermines the basic dignity associated with being the head of state'.

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