

If, like the common Oxbridge tutorial essay, one is required to grade these Dictionaries (and I understand the American Library Association has actually done so, ranging from 'excellent' through 'good' and 'fair' to 'poor') on an overall scale of merit, reliability, accessibility, completeness and presentation, the outcome is often one of those mean but meaningful Oxbridge grades like B+?: fundamentally quite good but could/must/can do better. As this kind of critical assessment — by librarians as well as by user scholars — has now been going on for years (Henige's seminal review appeared in the *Africana Journal* in 1979), it is a pity that the Series seems to have taken little notice of professional concerns and complaints expressed over a quarter century of reviews. For me, the *African Historical Dictionaries* undoubtedly do have their place in libraries, institutional as well as personal; they are often not only the instant recourse of student enquiries but also a frequent first-call resource for busy scholars, librarians and journalists. It is a place well deserved; a real need is often filled. In reviewing a single Dictionary, one can easily enthuse over its textual merits and forgive its blemishes in presentation. Reviewing a handful together, however, it is too easy to become irritated by their presentational inconsistencies and increasingly aware of the lamentable absence of co-ordinating editorial quality-control (often even at the primary level), and so forget the dedicated research undertaken by each volume's compiler. At the end of the day, the Series still continues (after 25 years) to be marred by the negative impression of never quite achieving its unquestioned potential. Like many a discerning TV programme watcher, I would not be without a TV . . . but how often I silently wish they would learn to present things better! The same ambivalence goes for my feelings over the wayward presentational quality of the *African Historical Dictionaries*.

St Antony's College, Oxford

A. H. M. KIRK-GREENE

On the Postcolony, by Achille Mbembe. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001. 274 pp. £29.95 hardback, £10.95 paperback. ISBN 0-520-20434-4 and 0-520-20435-2.

This is the first book in English by the Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe, the former secretary general of the African research consortium Codesria, who, although a historian by training, has developed a strong interest in philosophy, social theory and politics. Some readers will already be familiar with his essay 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', which was widely read when it was first published in the journal *Africa* in 1992 and which is reprinted as Chapter 3 of this new book. Another of the six chapters presented here (Chapter 4) has also been previously published. Thus, although Chapters 1 to 4 complement each other nicely, this remains at heart a collection of essays rather than a book with an argument developed throughout. The introduction, while an outstanding essay in its own right, does not really serve to present the whole, while the conclusion does not so much conclude as meander.

Mbembe is an essayist of fitful brilliance. His breadth of reading is exceptional and his intelligence is quick. There are flashes of sparkling insight. It must also be said that many points are overstated, there is at least one chapter (6) which has nothing really to do with the rest of the book and would have been better omitted, and there are passages which more closely resemble literary fiction than either history or social science. One particularly baroque, eleven-line passage, teetering on the verge of meaninglessness, seems on the most sympathetic reading to be expressing an idea so simple that it could have been better conveyed in just five or six words,

or possibly not written at all since it repeats sentiments elsewhere in the book (paragraph two on p. 241). The obscurities of some passages and the vacuousness of others are not the fault of the translators A. M. Berrett, Janet Roitman, Murray Last and Steven Rendall, who have on the whole done their job well and are to be congratulated.

The basic theme of most of the essays is the texture of political life in Africa, with particular reference to Cameroon. This enables Mbembe to explore how so many Africans are accomplices in the grotesque autocracies which too often preside over their destinies and which dominate them not only through coercion but also through complex patterns of words and behaviour which can extend to the most intimate activities. Sex (a favourite Mbembe theme), ribald humour (another favourite), rituals and habits of all sorts, form the very stuff of political life. This approach to the analysis of politics has been pioneered by a handful of French-speaking scholars of whom Mbembe is one, and there is no doubt that it is rich in promise, more so than the mainstream of political science which so often fails to capture the essence of African political life. Indeed, one of the most cogent passages here is the criticism in the introduction (pp. 1–23) of the deficiencies in the way social scientists and Westerners more generally have thought about Africa.

Chapters 1 and 2 especially ('Of *Commandment*' and 'On Private Indirect Government') evoke the style of government in much of Africa today and explicitly connect this to the experience of colonial rule. The latter, as Mbembe writes on p. 183, rested on force even when it also made use of treaties. The contribution of colonial government to what has occurred subsequently is the reason for the label 'postcolony', now widely used by literary and cultural theorists. According to Mbembe in his conclusion (p. 238), two major questions he claims to have treated in this regard are the relationship established in the colony and subsequently 'between the exercise of power and the process of becoming savage', and 'the mirror effect resulting from the entrance into the era of unhappiness'. He does not elaborate either of these questions through conventional historical scrutiny but rather by way of philosophical analysis, or even quasi-poetic evocation.

This interesting, original, self-indulgent book is likely, to judge from the reactions to Mbembe's earlier essays, to be championed by specialists in the fashionable field of postcolonial studies. But it would be a pity if it were therefore ignored by specialists from other fields, for some of the ideas here are rich in suggestions for further research, notably into such eminently practical and measurable elements of government and life as violence, transfers and allocations, discussed on pp. 39–52, and not only into the forms in which power is represented and in which people become subjects.

Many Africans are convinced that the roots of their present political problems lie in the nature of colonial government. This book suggests that the nature of power and its relationship to the subject in Africa today did indeed originate in colonizing and being colonized. We still need, though, a genuinely historical analysis of this matter presented in sustained form.