

Introduction:

Global Shadows

AFRICA AND THE WORLD

What kind of place is Africa? The question, on the face of it, is an improbable one. “Africa” is a huge continent, covering one fifth of the world’s land surface, where over 800 million people live an extraordinary variety of lives. Is there any meaningful sense in which we can speak of this as a “place”? Looking at the range of empirical differences internal to the continent—different natural environments, historical experiences, religious traditions, forms of government, languages, livelihoods, and so on—the unity of a thing called “Africa,” its status as a single “place,” however the continental descriptor may be qualified geographically or racially (“Sub-Saharan,” “black,” “tropical,” or what have you) seems dubious. Certainly, one may reasonably doubt whether national situations as different as, say, those of Botswana and Liberia are greatly illuminated by treating them as two examples of a generic Africanness, just as one is entitled to question the extent to which, say, Somalia and Namibia partake in a civilizational sameness. Indeed, it has often been suggested that the very category of “Sub-Saharan Africa,” with its conventional separation from a “Middle East” that would include North Africa, is as much a product of modern race thinking as it is an obvious cultural or historical unity.

Yet the world is (perhaps now more than ever) full of talk, not

of specific African nations, societies, or localities, but of “Africa” itself. And this “Africa” talk—both on the continent and off—seems to have a certain intensity, full of anguished energy and (often vague) moral concern. When we hear about “Africa” today, it is usually in urgent and troubled tones. It is never just Africa, but always the crisis in Africa, the problems of Africa, the failure of Africa, the moral challenge of Africa to “the international community,” even (in British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s memorable phrase) Africa as “a scar on the conscience of the world.” What is at stake in current discussions about “Africa,” its problems, and its place in the world? And what should be the response of those of us who have, over the years, sought to understand not “Africa in general” (that unlikely object) but specific places and social realities “in” Africa?

Historically, Western societies have found in “Africa” a radical other for their own constructions of civilization, enlightenment, progress, development, modernity, and, indeed, history. As Achille Mbembe (2001: 2) puts it, “Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world.” “Africa” in this sense has served as a metaphor of absence—a “dark continent” against which the lightness and whiteness of “Western civilization” can be pictured. It is in this sense that Africa, as a category, enters Western knowledge and imagination first of all, as Mbembe says, as “an absent object,” set always in relation to the full presence of the West. Today, for all that has changed, “Africa” continues to be described through a series of lacks and absences, failings and problems, plagues and catastrophes.

The discipline of anthropology is, of course, historically implicated in Western constructions of Africa. The importance of the role played by anthropology in this process is easily overstated, and broad-brush accounts of anthropology as “handmaiden to imperialism” have sometimes been insufficiently attentive to the diversity of theoretical and political currents within the discipline (and to the similar imbrication of other disciplines in colonial apparatuses of knowledge). But there is no doubt that anthropology was one of a number of sites for the elaboration of ideas of Africa as a continent defined by “tradition,” “simple societies,” and “soci-

eties without history,” even as “Africa” itself was a central site for the development of key ideas in anthropology (Moore 1994).¹ Yet in spite of the substantial disciplinary investment in the idea of “Africa,” anthropology has in recent decades turned away from the very category, perhaps hoping to avoid repeating the conceptual and political errors of colonial-era anthropology (cf. Asad 1973). Anthropological work on the continent has continued, of course, but neither descriptive nor theoretical claims are normally ventured at the level of “Africa.” The odd result is that the discipline that contributed more than any other to what V. Y. Mudimbe (1988) has termed “the invention of Africa” has had almost nothing to say about “Africa” in its time of crisis.

This is perhaps, in part, a consequence of anthropology’s twentieth-century disciplinary commitment to the detailed observation of spatially delimited areas through localized fieldwork (for a critical overview, see Gupta and Ferguson 1997b). If one starts with the premise that “real” knowledge of Africa is “grounded” in detailed ethnographic knowledge of local communities, then the likely response to a question about, say, “the crisis in Africa” is only too predictable. “Africa,” the traditional anthropologist will reply, “is, after all, an enormous and diverse continent. Conditions are really very different from country to country, and from locality to locality. So, I don’t know about ‘Africa,’ but let me tell you about where I worked. . . .” The reply is a principled one, but it is also a strikingly ineffective way of responding to the question. The result is that detailed anthropological knowledge seems to have very little impact on broader discussions about “Africa” (in the world of policy and practice or that of popular representations). Journalistic and policy visions of “Africa” thus continue to rely on narratives that anthropologists readily recognize as misleading, factually incorrect, and often racist; meanwhile, the scrupulously localized “Africa” that appears in the ethnographic accounts in professional anthropology journals becomes ever more difficult to relate to the “Africa” we read about in the *New York Times*. Refusing the very category of “Africa” as empirically problematic, anthropologists and other scholars devoted to particularity have thus allowed themselves to remain bystanders in the wider arena of discussions about “Africa.”²

Out of dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, I have in recent years tried to work toward a different sort of writing. The essays in this book are all attempts to speak, in an explicitly non- or supra-ethnographic way, about broader questions concerning the category that is “Africa” and its place in the world. I use the essay form as a way to move across analytic and scalar levels more freely than is usual in ethnographic accounts, and to move swiftly—indeed, speculatively—from particular observations to some very general and abstract, broad questions to which I seek to relate them. I do so not to present a synthetic view of an empirical object, but simply to try out (“essay”) certain ways of thinking about a continental predicament, and a discursive and imaginative object, that cannot be grasped simply as the sum of a series of localities. The essays, some previously published, are meant to be independent of each other, and each can be read as a single, stand-alone piece. But they converge around the question of “Africa” as a place-in-the-world, and they all in one way or another seek to use a consideration of this question as a way to think about such large-scale issues as globalization, modernity, worldwide inequality, and social justice.

My aim in doing this is emphatically *not* to define a historical or cultural region of “Africa” (or “Sub-Saharan Africa,” “black Africa,” “tropical Africa,” or what have you), and then identify features of that history or culture that would explain “the crisis in Africa.” There have been a number of recent attempts to do this by tracing causal relations between certain features of the historical experience or cultural heritage of “Africa” (normally, Sub-Saharan Africa, often excluding South Africa) and certain features of contemporary African societies or (especially) states that confound developmentalist expectations. Some such authors have focused on the relatively recent historical experience of colonialism, with its legacies of authoritarian rule (Ake 1997), pseudo-traditional rural despotism (Mamdani 1996), “weak states” (Clapham 1996; Reno 1999), “artificial” boundaries (Engelbert 2002), and enclave export production (Leonard and Straus 2003). Others refuse to give so much weight or power to the colonial era and consider a longer historical horizon. Some point to long-term considerations of geography and population density (Herbst 2000); others, to distinctive enduring features of African social and political organiza-

tion and the way that colonial and postcolonial African states, as Mbembe (2001: 40) has put it, “rested on eminently indigenous social bases.” The most ambitious of such authors seek to identify a Sub-Saharan civilizational trajectory characterized in terms that range from the impressively Braudelian, broad-brushed historical sociology of African “extroversion” of Jean-François Bayart (1993, 2000) to the dubious recent culturology of Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Deloz (1999).

Whatever one may think of such attempts, they are very different from the project undertaken here. The essays that follow make no attempt to identify historical or cultural features shared by all of “Africa” that would explain its distinctive and troubled historical encounter with “development.” They do, of course, refer at various points to specific regional social patterns that have been identified by empirical research (my own and, much more importantly, that of innumerable others, without which the book could not have been written). Indeed, it is only by drawing on and attempting to synthesize a vast regional literature that I am able to speak, for instance, of the spread of what I term “nongovernmental states” in chapters 1 and 8, or of a regional cultural “repertoire” of ways of understanding wealth in chapter 3. But my fundamental concern in this book is less with Africa as empirical territory (that “geographical accident,” as Mbembe [2002b: 630] has called it), culture region, or historical civilization than with “Africa” as a category through which a “world” is structured—a category that (like all categories) is historically and socially constructed (indeed, in some sense arbitrary), but also a category that is “real,” that is imposed with force, that has a mandatory quality; a category within which, and according to which, people must live. I want to focus attention on how a vast, complicated, heterogeneous region of the planet has come to occupy a place-in-the-world called “Africa” that is nowadays nearly synonymous with failure and poverty. I want to ask both how that place-in-the-world functions in a wider categorical system and what this means for the way we understand an increasingly transnational political, economic, and social “global order.”

Risks are undoubtedly involved in taking up, rather than simply critiquing or refusing, such a categorical “Africa” as a meaningful object of scholarship. Given the mischief that has been done by

depictions of “Africa” (especially, but not only, those propagated by foreign Western “experts”), some skepticism is appropriate. As Mbembe (2001: 241–42) has provocatively suggested, “There is no description of Africa that does not involve destructive and mendacious functions.” Yet a wide range of social actors on the continent understand their own situations, and construct their strategies for improving them, in terms of an imagined “Africa” and its place in a wider world. In chapter 6, for instance, we encounter the case of two impoverished Guinean boys who write a letter seeking help from “the members and officials of Europe” on behalf of “we the children and the youth of Africa,” and who use the word “Africa” or “African” no fewer than eleven times in their brief, one-page letter; in chapter 5 we see a group of highly educated young Zambian nationalists move from an optimistic discussion of a new Zambian national culture to an anguished debate over whether “Africans” suffer from a generic cultural inferiority. Such instances serve to remind us that it is not only scholars who give credence to a constructed African “geo-body” (as Thongchai Winichakul [1994] might put it) that is at once dubiously artificial and powerfully real. For as Mbembe (2001: 241–42) observes, when it comes to the category of “Africa,” the “oscillation between the real and the imaginary, the imaginary realized and the real imagined, does not take place solely in writing. This interweaving also takes place in life.”

As will become more clear in the pages to follow, I wish to suggest that recent thinking about “the globe” and “the global” often evokes an image of a planetary network of connected points, and that “Africa” is marginal to, and often even completely absent from, such dominant imaginations of “the global” (see especially chapter 1). The “globe” in “globalization,” in this respect, is not simply a synonym for “the world.” “The world,” in my usage, refers to a more encompassing categorical system within which countries and geographical regions have their “places,” with a “place” understood as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories (as in the expression “knowing your place”)—what I term, in shorthand, a “place-in-the-world.”

That “Africa” (however heterogeneous or incoherent such a category may be in the eyes of scholars) is a such a “place”—that is, a

socially meaningful, only too real, and forcefully imposed position in the contemporary world—is easily visible if we notice how fantasies of a categorical “Africa” (normally, “Sub-Saharan” or “black” Africa) and “real” political-economic processes on the continent are interrelated. Consider, for instance, a recent major study of private capital flows to Africa, which found that “negative perceptions of Africa are a major cause of under-investment” (Bhinda et al. 1999: 72). The team discovered that “even successful [African] countries suffer from negative information about the continent as a whole: ‘potential investors lump them together with other countries, as part of a *continent* that is considered not to be attractive’” (emphasis added). Indeed, the researchers found that investors are sometimes “unable to distinguish among countries” and tend “to attribute negative performance to the whole region” (Bhinda et al. 1999: 55). As one foreign investor put it, “The basic rule for black Africa is to get your money back as soon as possible, or don’t do it. Who knows what’s going to happen next year?” (Bhinda et al. 1999: 49). Such perceptions don’t just misunderstand social reality; they also shape it. The effect on African economies, according to the study, is “a vicious circle of poor information, low expectations, and low investment” (Bhinda et al. 1999: 72). As the authors point out, “If caution reduces investment in a given year, the resulting decline in productive capacity then fulfils their negative expectations, resulting in a low investment equilibrium” (Bhinda et al. 1999: 49). It is “complex investor perceptions rather than objective data” that guide many such investment decisions (Bhinda et al. 1999: 15), and it is clear that the spectral category “Africa” looms large in these perceptions, with powerfully consequential results.³

This brief example is perhaps enough to suggest just how real the category of “Africa” is in today’s global economy, and how short is the path linking the meanings and fantasies of words and images with what likes to imagine itself as the “real” world of global investment and capital flows (cf. Tsing 2001). This—the consequential power and mandatory force of regional categorization—is why we can no longer avoid talking about “Africa” if we want to understand the wider ordering of the “world” within which such a category has come to acquire its distinctive contemporary meaning.⁴

In most accounts, scholarly as well as popular, Africa is understood in relentlessly negative terms. In relation to the global political economy, Africa is inevitably characterized by reference to a series of lacks, failures, problems, and crises. Its states are “weak,” “poorly consolidated,” “failed,” and “dysfunctional”; its economies, “underdeveloped,” “collapsing,” and increasingly “marginal” to the world. Its people appear as victims many times over: victims of poverty, of war, and above all of AIDS—all the modern plagues that seem to have a kind of perverse affinity for the African continent. Such accounts can be rightly faulted for seeing Africa only in negative relation to normative standards (“proper states,” “good economies,” etc.) that are external to it (see later). But it would be difficult to argue that they are, in any simple way, mistaken. On the contrary, there appears to be an unfortunate abundance of evidence in support of such characterizations.

A recent literature makes clear that most African states today are indeed “failing” to perform most of the tasks that they are, in the terms of almost any normative political theory, “supposed to do,” and that much of the continent suffers from levels of insecurity and violence (if not outright civil war) that Africans and Africanists alike regard as terrifying. At the same time, it is equally clear that the latest round of worldwide capitalist restructuring, with its frenzied construction of “the global economy,” has left little or no place for Africa outside of its old colonial role as provider of raw materials (especially mineral wealth). Mass poverty—that long-standing continental curse—is not only not improving but, in many areas, actually getting worse. The AIDS situation on the continent, meanwhile, has become so grim that it is difficult to overstate the magnitude of the tragedy. With only 10 percent of the world’s population, Sub-Saharan Africa has fully two thirds of all the world’s people living with HIV/AIDS (some 25 million), and in 2003, some 2.2 million Africans died of the disease (some three quarters of the world total), a rate of some 6,000 every day (UNAIDS 2004). Estimated life expectancies at birth in a number of African countries have now dropped to the mid 30s and even lower (UNDP 2004), even as life spans almost everywhere else in the world continue to lengthen.

Economically, Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years has suffered from increasing marginalization, low or negative rates of economic growth, and a striking failure to attract foreign investment. In a recent worldwide ranking of “human poverty” (using an index composed of economic and “quality of life” measures), the lowest-ranking twenty countries were all in Africa, and of the lowest ranking fifty, thirty-nine were African.⁵ The region’s share of world gross national product (GNP), world trade, and foreign direct investment all have fallen sharply in the last thirty years. Giovanni Arrighi has characterized the situation as “the African tragedy” and noted that from the mid-1970s onward, African economies suffered “a true collapse—a plunge followed by continuing decline in the 1980s and 1990s” (Arrighi 2002: 16). He cites statistics showing that the regional per capita GNP of Sub-Saharan Africa, which in 1975 stood at 17.6 percent of the world average, had dropped by 1999 to just 10.5 percent, while “Sub-Saharan health, mortality and adult-literacy levels have deteriorated at comparable rates” (Arrighi 2002: 5). Africa’s economic collapse, Arrighi observes, has had “disastrous consequences not only for the welfare of its people but also for their status in the world at large” (Arrighi 2002: 17). From a very different theoretical and political location, Nicholas van de Walle has given a similar account of Africa’s “progressive marginalization from the world economy” (van de Walle 2001: 5). He cites figures showing that the average African country’s GNP per capita actually shrank between 1970 and 1998, with GNP in 1998 just 91 percent of the figure for 1970 (van de Walle 2001: 277). Africa’s share of global economic activity, meanwhile, he describes as “small and declining,” with the region accounting for 10 percent of the world’s population, but only 1.1 percent of world gross domestic product (GDP) and 0.6 percent of world foreign direct investment (van de Walle 2001: 5–6). Reviewing similar statistics on the declining African share of world trade, Susan George has remarked, “One can almost hear the sound of sub-Saharan Africa sliding off the world map” (George 1993: 66).⁶

Politically, the continent has been racked by a series of civil and interstate wars, with a number of countries having endured year after year of endemic instability and violence and, along with that, the killing, maiming, and masses of refugees that so often dominate

the world's imagination of "Africa." Political elites have found ways to capitalize on conditions of insecurity and private violence, with the result that the bureaucratic state has in many parts of Africa been "hollowed out" (Clapham 1996), while what William Reno (1999) has termed "warlord politics" has become increasingly entrenched. Even in countries that have enjoyed relative peace, practices of personal rule, clientelism, and "corruption" have left states increasingly unable or unwilling to provide basic levels of public order, infrastructure, and social services. Indeed, rather than even seeking to impose law, at least some African rulers have secured for themselves a niche in the global economy through organized illegality—what Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hibou (1999) have termed "the criminalization of the state in Africa."

A dark picture, undoubtedly. Suspiciously dark, perhaps, given the apparent continuity here with old Western myths of African failure, African savagery, African darkness. Do accounts that cast Africa as a land of failed states, uncontrollable violence, horrific disease, and unending poverty simply recycle old clichés of Western presence and eternal African absence—as if the earth, like the moon, had a permanently darkened half, a shadowed land fated never to receive its turn to come into the "light" of peace and prosperity? We are surely right to be suspicious of accounts that see in Africa only a lack or an incompleteness, and of authoritative announcements that, as Mbembe (2001: 9) has pointedly observed, tell us "nearly everything that African states, societies, and economies *are not*" while telling us little or nothing about what they actually *are*. But while it is appropriate to maintain a certain skepticism for discourses of African lack and failure, it would be a mistake to dismiss or to deny the bleakness of the continental picture that emerges from recent studies of "Africa" or to suppose wishfully that the ugliness and horror depicted in the empirical studies are simply the projection of a Western fantasy. The gloomy assessments cited earlier tell an important truth about Africa's contemporary place-in-the-world. They cannot be dismissed as an "Afro-pessimism" that could, by an act of will, be discarded in favor of a sunny "Afro-optimism."⁷

This is especially clear when we consider that the policy measures and reforms of recent years that were supposed to provide the grounds for “Afro-optimism” by reversing Africa’s economic marginalization and reining in its often predatory governments are now widely recognized as having failed to achieve their stated purposes. “Structural-adjustment” policies, imposed on African states by international lenders in the 1980s and 1990s, were supposed to achieve “stabilization” and economic growth through the devaluation of currencies, the deregulation of markets (including agricultural markets), the reduction of state bureaucracies, and the privatization of state and parastatal industries.⁸ In keeping with the economic philosophy of “neoliberalism,” it was preached that removing state “distortions” of markets would create the conditions for economic growth, while rapid privatization would yield a flood of new private capital investment. The effects of these measures on economic growth, and the extent to which they were or were not actually implemented in particular countries, remain hotly debated.⁹ But this much is clear: The idea that deregulation and privatization would prove a panacea for African economic stagnation was a dangerous and destructive illusion. Instead of economic recovery, the structural-adjustment era has seen the lowest rates of economic growth ever recorded in Africa (actually negative, in many cases), along with increasing inequality and marginalization (cf. chapter 3).

Equally destructive has been the effect of so-called structural adjustment on African states. As van de Walle has argued, structural-adjustment loans have had “a negative impact on central state capacity, and have actually reinforced neopatrimonial tendencies in the region” (van de Walle 2001: 14). Austerity measures meant to “roll back the state” to make room for markets and “civil society” have led instead to “a noted increase in corruption and rent-seeking” (van de Walle 2001: 275–76) and to what Hibou has termed “the privatization of the state” (Hibou 2004). Alongside this, the “reform” process has, according to van de Walle,

motivated a progressive withdrawal of governments from key developmental functions they had espoused in an earlier era. All over Africa, the withdrawal from social services is patent, particularly

outside the capital. In the poorest countries of the region, donors and NGOs have increasingly replaced governments, which now provide a minor proportion of these services. Even in the richest countries, the state's ability and willingness to service rural constituencies has atrophied. Paradoxically, many of the states in the region are both more centralized and bigger, and yet they appear to do less development work than they did before adjustment. (van de Walle 2001: 276)

The formal democratization of many African states in the 1990s, which many took to mark an optimistic new beginning for the continent, has in a number of countries transformed the political terrain in important ways. But multiparty elections, where they have occurred, have done little to alter the fundamental dynamic of “weak” and predatory states. For one thing, many elections on the continent have been little more than elaborately staged ceremonies through which authoritarian leaders have sought to ratify their rule. Even genuinely multiparty elections, pronounced “free and fair” by international observers, have often been sites for the exercise of clientelistic power and organized violence. Such observations would seem to support the prediction of one leading political scientist who speculated a decade ago that formal democratization was unlikely to alter a “bedrock political form” in the region that would remain “weak, authoritarian, clientelistic, and inefficient” (Callaghy 1995: 150). But perhaps the more important point is that the promise of democracy has been held out to African publics at just the moment in history when key matters of macro-economic policy were taken out of the hands of African states, inviting Ankie Hoogvelt's skeptical conclusion that “it must have been thought in international policy circles that the pain of [structural] adjustment would be easier to bear if the people felt that they had voted for it themselves” (Hoogvelt 2002: 24). Democratization, in an ironic twist, became a way of placing the blame for the structural problems of African economies squarely on the shoulders of African governments—and by implication on African voters themselves (see chapter 3). Meanwhile, substantial matters involving the policies of external donors have tended to be insulated from processes of representative democracy, often via the

use of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), glossed as “civil society,” as a kind of surrogate *demos*. The result is what Jeremy Gould and Julia Ojanen, in their stimulating study of poverty politics in Tanzania, have termed “a depoliticized mode of technocratic governance” (Gould and Ojanen 2003: 7; cf. chapters 3 and 4).

The economic and political reforms of the last two decades were meant to bring African states and economies into line with a standard global model. But the ironic result of the structural-adjustment era has been the creation of an Africa that is actually more different than ever from the imagined global standard, more of a “problem case” than ever before. As discussed in several of the chapters to follow, neoliberal Africa has in recent years seen a proliferation of collapsed states or states whose presence barely extends beyond the boundaries of their capital cities. Vast areas of the continent have been effectively abandoned by their national states, subject instead to the tense and shifting authority of warlords and private armies and to the economic predations of resource-extracting multinational firms operating in secured economic enclaves (Reno 1999, 2001a; chapter 8). Modern social and medical services, where they exist at all, are more likely to be provided by transnational NGOs than by states (see chapter 4)—and this at a time that the AIDS epidemic is creating unprecedented need for such services. Endemic violence, “weak” states, and resource-extracting enclave production are hardly new features of the African political economy, of course. But there does appear to be a new extremity in the way that many African states have withdrawn from their putative national societies, leaving export production concentrated in guarded enclaves that are increasingly detached from their surrounding societies.¹⁰

The links between resource-extraction enclaves, chronic warfare, and predatory states have been much discussed recently (Leonard and Straus 2003; Reno 1999, 2001a; see also chapter 8). But it is worth noting how such enclaves participate not only in the destruction of national economic spaces but also in the construction of “global” ones. For just as enclaves of, say, mining production are often fenced off (literally and metaphorically) from their surrounding societies, they are at the same time linked up, with a “flexibility”

that is exemplary of the most up-to-date, “post-Fordist” neoliberalism, both with giant transnational corporations and with networks of small contractors and subcontractors that span thousands of miles and link nodes across multiple continents (see Reno 2001a; chap. 8).

As I argue in chapter 1, “Globalizing Africa?” such a geography finds its place in a world where much is indeed “globally connected,” but such “global” links connect in a selective, discontinuous, and point-to-point fashion. This is true not only of the economic connections of transnational capital, but also of the “global” networks of NGOs that increasingly dominate the space of politics on the continent. Such networks of political and economic connection do indeed “span the globe,” as is often claimed, but they do not cover it. Instead, they hop over (rather than flowing through) the territories inhabited by the vast majority of the African population. This leaves most Africans with only a tenuous and indirect connection to “the global economy,” as critics have often observed. But this is not simply a matter of exclusion. The same processes that produce exclusion, marginalization, and abjection are also producing new forms of non-national economic spaces (see chapters 1 and 8), new forms of government by NGO and transnational networks (see chapter 4), and new kinds of more or less desperate claims to membership and recognition at a supranational level (see chapter 6).

Africa’s participation in “globalization,” then, has certainly not been a matter simply of “joining the world economy”; perversely, it has instead been a matter of highly selective and spatially encapsulated forms of global connection combined with widespread disconnection and exclusion. Any attempt to understand the position in the world that is Africa must take into account both this bleak political economic predicament and its broader implications with respect to Africa’s “rank” in an imagined (and real) “world.” That a purportedly universalizing movement of “globalization” should have the effect of rendering Africa once again “dark” in the eyes of the wider world suggests the intimate link, in this respect, between the question of economic marginalization in a global economy and that of membership in a global society.

It is difficult to avoid noticing an abundance of shadows in recent discussions of Africa's political economy. Economic analysts of Africa have long spoken of a "shadow economy," of course, an "informal sector" where goods and services not officially reckoned are traded on the "black market." While the "shadow economy" exists everywhere, Africa is perhaps distinctive in that, on much of the continent, it is generally reckoned to be larger than the formal sector (of which it is presumably the shadow). Meanwhile, Ali Mazrui has complained that, in adopting the Western profit motive but not the entrepreneurial spirit, Africans have borrowed "the shadow, not the substance" of a Western capitalist economy (as cited in Hecht and Simone 1994: 107). By analogy with the shadow economy, Reno (1999) has recently developed the idea of the "shadow state" as a way to describe the way that state officials in "weak states" may gain power not through their control of a state bureaucracy, but through more or less concealed alliances with local power brokers or warlords, arms traders, and multinational firms. Carolyn Nordstrom (2001), meanwhile, has proposed an "ethnography of the shadows" that would explore the international networks that emerge in African war zones outside but alongside the forms of trade formally recognized by states. Similarly, Mark Duffield (2001) finds a key to African civil conflict in what he calls "shadow networks," while the private security forces that play a leading role in African conflicts go by such names as "shadow armies" and "shadow soldiers" (*New York Times* 2004). Globalization theorists, meanwhile, have shadowy metaphors of their own when it comes to Africa, describing the continent as revealing the "dark side" (Stiglitz 2001) or "Satanic geographies" (Smith 1997) of globalization or as constituting a "black hole of the information economy" (Castells 2000).

To read all this, it is hard to avoid remembering once again the legacy of Africa's historical role, in the eyes of the West, as the "dark continent," the land of shady goings-on. No doubt the old colonial version of African "darkness" as simply an absence of the bright light of reason still lingers in some quarters, especially in popular and journalistic accounts. But the dominant tone of recent schol-

arly writings on Africa suggests a different sort of darkness—not so much a continent defined by a lack of enlightenment as a place where much is unknown, hard to make out, perhaps even unknowable. This speaks, perhaps, to the methodological difficulties and limitations of the research endeavor as much as it does to the “African” social realities being described.

But there is more to the prevalent “shadow” imagery than simply darkness or poor visibility. Beyond mere uncertainty or lack of clarity, the “shadow” idea usually also implies also a kind of *doubling*. Alongside the official economy, the “shadow economy” is an “informal” one that is “parallel” to it. Doubling the formal state as it appears or pretends to be, we find the “shadow state” lurking beside it. Alongside the uniformed troops of the “legitimate” national army are the private “shadow soldiers” of private or “irregular” armies. In all of these figurations, the first version is the “official,” and implicitly Western, model, while its uncanny dark double is the “African” version thereof. This leads to a cluster of now tired questions, all turning on the uncertainty about whether such “African” doubles are “really” what they pretend to be. (Are African states really states at all? Are African elections real elections? Are African working classes really working classes? and so on.) And, complementarily, this leads to the cultural nationalist question, Do institutions and cultural forms that are copied (however “imperfectly”) from a Western model retain their status as “really” (i.e., authentically) “African”? (For a recent critical discussion, see Mbembe 2002a.)

African aspirations to “development” and “modernity” have always been shadowed by such questions surrounding the authenticity of the copy. The twin fears are that the copy is either too different from the original or not different enough. The fear that the copy is too different is the fear that “modern” African institutions and practices are failed copies, faint copies, mere shadows of the original—indeed, such imperfect likenesses that they are unable to function as that which they pretend to be or ought to be (thus, Africa as a continent of failed states, faux nations, and “basket-case” economies). The converse fear is that the copy is not different enough, that it is merely derivative and therefore empty; that modern Africa has lost its relation to itself and ceased to be

properly “African”; that it has (through the distortions of imperialism, racism, and globalization) become a mere bad copy, a negative image of someone else’s positivity.¹¹ Africans, in this view, should reject the false value placed on things Western and value “their own” cultures instead. But both worries ignore the fact that a shadow is not only a dim or empty likeness. It also implies a bond and a relationship. A shadow, after all, is not a copy but an attached twin—a shadow is what sticks with you. Likeness here implies not only resemblance but also a connection, a proximity, an equivalence, even an identity. A shadow, in this sense, is not simply a negative space, a space of absence; it is a likeness, an inseparable other-who-is-also-oneself to whom one is bound.

Highlighting this last dimension of the shadowy nature of Africa’s place-in-the-world is a way of insisting on the fundamental *relationality* (as Mary Louise Pratt [2002] has put it) of the position in the world that is “Africa” (cf. Simone 2001). Independence formally broke the colonial shadow relation between “Africa” and “the West,” declaring that African nations would henceforth “stand on their own.” An ironic result was the localization of responsibility for “African poverty” in the policies and programs of African nation-states. As I show in chapter 2, a comparison of the depoliticization of poverty in the internationally recognized nation-state of Lesotho with the fiercely “relational” contestations over economic inequality in the discussion of the South African “Bantustan” (and would-be nation-state) of Transkei reveals how the political form of the independent nation-state has obscured the continuing transnational relations that help to produce “African poverty.” More recently, neoliberal restructuring has brought its own disconnections and disavowals, with the reduction of official aid and an emphasis on “African responsibility for African problems” (see chapters 3 and 5). But as the essays in the latter part of this book seek to show, the shadows of an Africa-in-the-world keep creeping in, insisting on an ongoing relationship between “Africa” and “the West” and ongoing responsibilities as a consequence thereof. Claims of likeness, in this context, constitute not a copying, but a shadowing, even a haunting—a declaration of comparability, an aspiration to membership and inclusion in the world, and sometimes also an assertion of a responsibility.

I began to think about this during my first fieldwork in Africa in a village in the mountains of Lesotho in 1983. I was talking to an older man whom I knew well (I will call him Mr. Lebona) about his plans to build a new house for himself and his family. He proudly declared his intention to build what he called a “European-style” house, by which he meant a small rectangular house with a cement floor and a galvanized steel roof. Such houses were newly in fashion at that time, and most of the newer houses in the area were of this kind, replacing the old-style Sesotho round houses, which were built with stone walls and thatched grass roofs. I was living in a rented Sesotho-style house and had developed an appreciation for the virtues of the local architecture. The round houses were, thanks to their thick mud-and-stone walls, admirably insulated, staying cool in the summer and warm in the winter. They were built entirely with local materials and local labor, and they nestled beautifully into the hills from which their rock walls were dug. The cattle-dung plaster used on the walls and floors was even said to have naturally antiseptic properties. The Sesotho round houses seemed to me, in the language of the times, an “appropriate technology.” The “European” rectangular houses, in contrast, were (thanks to their metal roofs) hot in the summer and cold in the winter. They were also unnecessarily expensive, requiring imported materials, and conspicuously ugly. I made the case to Mr. Lebona in just these terms. Why did he want to build a rectangular “European” house, when the “local,” Sesotho traditional house had all these virtues?

Mr. Lebona looked amused. His response, which came quickly and forcefully, gave me pause, and still does. Looking me carefully in the eye, he asked, “What kind of house does your father have, there in America?” (I was at the time young enough to be regarded as a mere “student,” so the use of my father as the point of comparison was logical). “Is it round?” No, I confessed; it was rectangular. “Does it have a grass roof?” No, it did not. “Does it have cattle dung for a floor?” No. And then: “How many rooms does your father’s house have?” Here, I had to stop and think—which Mr. Lebona appeared to find amazing, as rectangular houses in his experience had either two or three rooms. Finally, I mumbled, “About ten, I think.” After pausing to let this sink in, he said only: “That is the direction we would like to move in.”

The shift that Mr. Lebona forced in my line of thinking is instructive. Starting from the premise that “Sesotho culture” was in no way inferior, I began by defending the virtues of traditional architecture. Why, when one has a valuable culture of one’s own, would one seek a copy (a bad copy, at that) of the culture of the colonizer? Mr. Lebona interrupted that argument with questions about material inequality. Was it not true that my father’s house was a finer house? That it was bigger? Made of more expensive materials? And was it not true that, once my fieldwork was over, I would go home to live in a house like my father’s, not a one-room structure made of rocks and dung? The aspiration to a “European” house, he forced me to see, was not a matter of blind copying; it was a powerful claim to a chance for transformed conditions of life—a place-in-the-world, a standard of living, a “direction we would like to move in.”

The lesson I draw from this is not that analysts of Africa ought to focus on “political economy” instead of “culture” (as if economic inequalities were somehow non-cultural or cultural differences were somehow immaterial or apolitical). It is, rather, that the question of cultural difference itself is (everywhere, no doubt, but perhaps especially in contemporary Africa) tightly bound up with questions of inequality, aspiration, and rank in an imagined “world.” While a relativizing anthropology has, out of a well-intentioned but misplaced sense of “respect,” tried to treat different cultural traditions as “equal,” real cultural differences always take on meaning within contexts of sharp social and economic inequality. Inequality is thus not only a matter of “political economy”; cultural differences (e.g., in dress, language, or, indeed, styles of house construction) may in practice be just as “stratified” (i.e., ranked from “high” to “low”) as income or wealth.

The theme of the “copying” of Western forms and its relation to questions of standing in the world is developed in two of the essays that follow. Chapter 5, “Chrysalis,” uses an analysis of discussions that emerged in a Zambian on-line magazine to explore the problems and limits of nationalism in neoliberal times. The magazine *Chrysalis* was a bold attempt by a group of young, highly educated, cosmopolitan elites to craft a new Zambian nationalism for the information age. But their discussion of a new “national cul-

ture” was quickly overtaken by the scandalous suggestion (made by a Zambian columnist) that the only “culture” Zambia needed for the information age was “the culture of the whites,” which should therefore be simply “copied.” The storm of controversy raised by this suggestion and its surprising resolution sheds light, I suggest, on the difficulties in creating national culture and nationalist discourses of legitimation under conditions of neoliberalism. Chapter 6, “Mimicry and Membership,” begins with a reading of an open letter written by two Guinean boys who lost their lives trying to get to Europe, a letter that appeals to the “members of Europe” to (among other things) “help us to become like you.” Again, the scandal of an apparent mimicry helps us to think about what is really at stake in contemporary assertions of African difference and likeness and allows us to see how the idea of cultural difference has sometimes helped to disguise relations of inequality and to deflect claims for “Western” recognition of, and responsibility for, “Africa.”

My claim is that taking a hard, and sometimes uncomfortable, look at African aspirations to “likeness” with real and imagined Western standards can help to point out serious gaps in some of our most cherished understandings of cultural diversity and global order. For in each of the cases I discuss, the question of likeness forces an unsettling shift from the question of cultural *difference* to the question of material *inequality*—just as Mr. Lebona shifted my attention from a regard for cultural difference (a Sesotho-style house) to an acknowledgement of extreme inequality (a one-room house versus a ten-room house). The connection of cultural difference to social inequality is a theme that is insufficiently appreciated in much recent thinking about what is sometimes called global culture. For cultural practices are not just a matter of flow and diffusion or of consumer choices made by individuals. Instead, they index membership in different and unequal social groups, globally as well as locally. In this sense, yearnings for cultural convergence with an imagined global standard (like Mr. Lebona’s wish for a rectangular house) can mark not simply mental colonization or capitulation to cultural imperialism, but an aspiration to overcome categorical subordination. The persistence of cultural difference, meanwhile (however inventive and hybrid it may be), can come to appear as the token not (as it often appears to the anthropologist)

of brave cultural resistance, but of social and economic subjection (where a “traditional African way of life” is simply a polite name for poverty).

Perhaps this is why so much of the critical literature on globalization seems oddly out of place in Africa. Most Africans can hardly feel that they are being dominated by being forced to take on the goods and forms of a homogenizing global culture when those goods and forms are, in fact, largely unavailable to them. “Globalization” has not brought a global consumer culture within the reach of most Africans, and still less has it imposed a homogenization of lifestyles with a global norm. Rather, it has brought an increasingly acute awareness of the semiotic and material goods of the global rich, even as economic pauperization and the loss of faith in the promises of development have made the chances of actually attaining such goods seem more remote than ever. Under such circumstances, the problems of homogenization that loom large in many accounts of globalization’s evils (such as the “McDonaldization” of cuisine or the “culture-eroding” effects of American television) can hardly appear to be burning problems to those who are largely unable to act as consumers of the goods of the global consumer society. That such people find other ways of getting by, that they concoct “local” ways both of “coping” and asserting global membership, often through a brilliantly inventive bricolage of scraps and leftovers, is a fact more likely to be celebrated by the cultural analyst than by the “locals” themselves, who may see such practices more as signs of weakness than of strength.

Contrary examples are also readily available. History is littered with instances of social oppression taking the form of forced cultural assimilation, when the defense of cultural difference and the resistance of foreign domination have been neatly aligned. But there is no fixed or inevitable link between oppression or colonization and cultural strategies that seek similarity rather than difference. Anthropologists in particular have often supposed that the maintenance of cultural difference somehow naturally stands on the side of what is vaguely specified as “resistance” to “power.” But we must allow that cherished link to be put into question if we are to grasp a range of African attempts to assert membership and equality through likeness and to claim what Homi Bhabha

(2001) has termed a “semblant solidarity.” If such strategies (like Mr. Lebona’s plans for a rectangular house) can appear as a certain sort of “shadow” of that to which they aspire, it is a shadow that marks not simply a silhouette of darkness and absence but a haunting figure of resemblance—a “shade” that, through its uncanny combination of likeness and difference, claims a connection, a relationship, and sometimes an aspirational equality. As African societies have long recognized, a shade is not an absence, an emptiness, or a derivative image. It is a kind of relative.

This suggests the need for a modest skepticism toward the commonly taken for granted values of independence (the aim of traditional African nationalism) and “local autonomy” (the value animating a good deal of current “antiglobalization” politics). For the claim that looms largest, in the essays that follow—a claim that is rendered incomprehensible, if not actually contemptible, by a paradigm that equates liberation with national independence—is the claim of worldly connection and membership, the claim that explicitly contests the separation and segmentation that have so far been the principal fruit of “globalization” for Africa. It is a claim that to consider “Africa” is to consider relationships and responsibilities in a larger system; to consider, as part and parcel of “the global,” the question of membership and its criteria. A place-in-the-world is a place in a system of dependencies and responsibilities, rights and obligations. It is all too easy to attenuate these relationships, to replace the real relations of inequality and dependence with a merely formal relation of equality among independent entities (see chapter 2). But the most challenging current political demands go beyond the claims of political independence and instead involve demands for connection, and for relationship, even under conditions of inequality and dependence (see chapter 6).

Does such a move threaten the claim of a proud equality among nations that once made national independence such a compelling political program? On the face of it, yes, since it insists on foregrounding the continuing inequalities that independence was, in the ideal version of things, supposed to abolish. But if there is one thing that we should have learned from the history of the new nations in the post–World War II era, it is that substantive inequality does not go away through setting up formally equal flags,

embassies, etc. (see chapter 2)—no more than the substantive inequality among citizens in liberal capitalism goes away when each has the right to equality under the law (the law that, as Anatole France famously wrote in *Le Lys Rouge* in 1894, “in its majestic equality forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread”).¹² The re-emergent question of supranational membership—of Africans as, in some yet to be defined sense, “citizens of the world”—puts the question of the unequal relation between Africa and the West back on the table in a radical way, after decolonization and national independence had channeled it, for a time, into the question of national development.

At this point, we can see the emergence of forms of new politics that are not captured in the old frameworks of nationalism and development. These include the emergence of a politics of “international civil society” (see chapter 4), claims of transnational moral accountability (see chapter 3), claims to an imagined supranational authority that might recognize rights that are denied at the level of the nation-state (see chapter 6), and attempts to assert transnational responsibility directly, often via desperate forms of migration (see chapters 6 and 7). Analysis of these newly emergent politics is only beginning, but those seeking to understand contemporary African politics, in the widest sense, will need new habits of thinking if we are to grasp their true originality and importance.

The questions raised by considering Africa’s place-in-the-world, then, are indeed “global” ones, but not in the way that most discussions of globalization would imply. Instead, they point to the need for a new framing of discussions of the global: centered less on transnational flows and images of unfettered connection than on the social relations that selectively constitute global society; the statuses and ranks that it comprises; and the relations, rights, and obligations that characterize it. To take seriously African experiences of the global requires that any discussion of “globalization” and “new world orders” must first of all be a discussion of social relations of membership, responsibility, and inequality on a truly planetary scale.