

Book review

Jean-Pierre Chrétien (dir), *L'Afrique de Sarkozy : Un déni d'histoire (Sarkozy's Africa: denying history)*, Paris, Karthala, 2008, 204 pages

Francis Arsène Fogue Kuate*, University of Ngaoundere (Cameroon)

L'Afrique de Sarkozy: un déni d'histoire (Sarkozy's Africa: denying history) is an intellectual and scientific response to the Afro-pessimistic and borderline provocative speech by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, in Dakar (Senegal), on July 26, 2007. Far from an attempt to “start yet another anti-Sarkozy controversy in which certain media revel” (p.11), the authors of this book, published by Karthala editions under the supervision of Jean-Pierre Chrétien want to tell the truth about Africa's history and past. As J-P. Chrétien puts it in his foreword, the aim of the book is to: “respond to that speech, take a stand on this public act, striking in its form, if not in its content that proved to be unfortunately all too commonplace” (p.11). This means that one cannot read and understand this 204 pages book independently from the now famous and historic speech of July 26, 2007. This is indeed why the book includes, as an annex, the complete text of the speech (pp.191-202). It is hence impossible to forget that this speech, beyond a simple message to the people of Dakar and Africa, represents a sort of “founding speech for France's new African policy” as Kroubo (2009) puts it. This explains why this speech, delivered at the beginning of the new French President's trip to Sub-Saharan Africa, threw many Africans and Westerners in a state of confusion. Drafted by Henri Guaino, Nicolas Sarkozy's speech, that J-P Chrétien describes as “rhetorical and feverishly imbued of *captatio benevolentiae*” (p.9), sent shock of waves that had an impact on the relations of his country with Africa because “the speeches of the President of the Republic on Africa establish the official position of our times, not that of a former era. The ideological, political and social stakes are too high...” (p.12).

* The author is a doctoral candidate in political history. He served as intern at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Bucharest with a grant from the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie. Assistant researcher at the Support Center for Laboratory Research in social Sciences (Car-Lss), he is also member of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria).

After noting that Africans have played a role in the decay of their continent, its marginality and its a-historicism, the French President, appropriating for political reasons the European-centered Hegelian theories of the 18th and 19th centuries – as illustrated by Olivier Pironet (2007) –, did not fail to ask Africans to make history.¹ This speech has enabled many pundits to make prophesies about the Office of the President's attitude towards African States. It was an early warning sign on the future of the relationship between France and Africa. And it is for this reason that the allegations made during that speech risked perverting even more the nature of this relationship. Using metaphors, stereotypes, reactionary theories and erroneous interpretations of African history, Nicolas Sarkozy whose role it was to define and guide France's African policy, seemed to know nothing about Africa, France's historical partner. If one reads between the lines, it is easy to understand that he was presenting, describing, qualifying and outlining his conception of Africa. The first part of the title *Sarkozy's Africa* is quite revealing. President Sarkozy had a fantasy, stereotypical and distorted conception of Africa. He describes “an Africa that does not exist and that harks back to paternalistic visions from the 19th century”.² One can then wonder about the direction taken by France's African policy that seems to rely on “a century-old obsolete intellectual legacy, despite some patching up” (Mbembe, 2007) and to hinge on a “primitive vision of African societies” (p.9).

Since this speech “follows provocatively the most reactionary anthropological clichés” (p.25), there is no doubt that Nicolas Sarkozy's African policy will be a policy of “deliberate ignorance” based on a denial of responsibility, as shown by Achille Mbembe (2007). Hence the second part of the title of the book: *Denying history*. Sarkozy is denying history to the extent that, in his speech drafted by Guaino, the French State deliberately consigned to oblivion several chapters of African history. Five African and Africanist intellectuals – Jean-Pierre Chrétien, Pierre Boilley, Achille Mbembe, Ibrahima Thioub et Jean-François Bayart – have come together in this book in order to redress this crime of lèse-majesté against Africa. These five authors embody the idea and philosophy of Françafrique.³ The fact that so many historians collaborated for this book

¹ For Nicolas Sarkozy: «Africa's tragedy is that the African Man did not become part of history. The African farmer who has been following for millennia the rhythm of the seasons and whose ideal life is to be in harmony with nature only knows the eternal cycle of time marked by the endless repetition of the same deeds and the same words.» Speech of Dakar, July 26, 2007

² ROBERT, Anne-Cécile, « Un discours controversé: l'Afrique au Kärcher », *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2007, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2007/09/ROBERT/15092>

³ It is worth noting that this group of five authors is composed of French (J-P Chrétien, J-F Bayart, P. Boilley) and African (A. Mbembe, Ibrahima Thioub) scholars, without concealing the fact that there are more French than African authors.

can be explained by its editorial policy and the desire to “better understand Africa” by giving it back its history. Each author puts its experience to use in four chapters of unequal length.

In a short but dense contribution of four pages (pp. 31-34), Jean-François Bayart analyzed the speech of Nicolas Sarkozy in the heat of the moment. He was amazed by the “Dakar comments of Nicolas Sarkozy” and noted that such comments were a faux-as “in a university named after one of the leading thinkers of Negritude.” (p.32). With irony, he adds that “Nicolas Sarkozy, who likes quoting great authors of the Republic, might as well have taken up Victor Hugo’s 1879 *Speech on Africa...*”⁴ (*ibid*). This contribution is unique because it shows the continuity of Nicolas Sarkozy’s policy with that of its predecessors. This is clearly shown in the title of this section: “There’s no rupture, boss!”. Deciphering the Dakar speech while, at the same time, following an approach based on “Realpolitik pragmatism”, the author posits that “the vibrant calls for a overhaul of Franco-African relations during the electoral campaign only mattered to those who wanted to believe in them or those who were filled with despair by Ségolène Royal’s inept comments...” (pp.31-32). This vision of Nicolas Sarkozy’s Dakar speech becomes clearer with Kroubo (2009) who believes that President Sarkozy failed the African youth when he forgot the promises he made in his election speech of 2007, in which he denounced “the mafia links between his predecessors and some African leaders of Françafrique (...). But, once in power, he was confronted to the power of Françafrique. Unable to change the neocolonial policy of this institution, he supported, like his predecessors, Déby, during the last war in Chad. He kept a low profile in front of Oumar Bongo who was humiliated by the French media and sent Claude Guéant et Alain Joyandet to Libreville to patch things up after Jean-Marie Bockel’s blunder”. To this list of about turns by Nicolas Sarkozy in his relationship with Françafrique, one can also add François Fillon’s visit in Cameroon in May 2009; the establishment, within the French Government, of a General Secretariat for the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of the former French colonies in Africa; the participation of French troops to the military parade celebrating Senegal’s fifty years of independence; the Summit Africa-France in Nice in May 2010 and the participation of African heads of State and of their armies to the festivities of July 14, 2010.⁵ All this clearly brings proof, if any were needed,

⁴ In this speech, Victor Hugo goes about describing Africa in a catastrophic and offensive manner and Bayart enjoys quoting it: « this block of sand and ash, this morsel, inert and passive, that, for six thousand years, obstructed the universal march (of progress) ». See page 32.

⁵ Most heads of State of the former French colonies attended the parade, with the exception of the Ivorian President, Laurent Gbagbo, who refused the invitation of the Office of the President.

that President Sarkozy has now explicitly fallen in line with the tradition of Françafrique that continues to be the “ biggest scandal of the Republic ” (Verschave, 2003).

Taking a step back from a political analysis of Nicolas Sarkozy’s speech, Jean-Pierre Chrétien, who wrote the second chapter of this book, armed himself with his glasses of historian specializing in Africa in order to go back to distant sources of African history to find benchmarks, facts and events objectivizing the rich history of this continent. Starting his analysis during the last millennia before the Christian era, he asks the reader to revisit “ the place where the first cereals were grown and the first cattle raised and where the world’s oldest pottery can be found ”, not to mention the continent’s agricultural technology and political and religious buildings (pp. 40-48). He also does not fail to remind us of the Slave Trade era. While one can applaud the way this author has been able to summarize so much material, clear sign that he masters his subject matter, certain specialists in Africa’s ancient history like Théophile Obenga (2005) or Cheikh Anta Diop (1955) could criticize him for not spending enough time on Pharaonic Egypt and on its influence on the history and civilization of humanity that needs no further proof.

Another chapter, another analysis, Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe adopts a philosophical approach and incorporates considerations linked to the imaginary in his analysis. In a long contribution of 42 pages (91-132), he is offended by the fact that, after several years of collaboration, “ Westerners ”, and more specifically the French, are still unable to truly understand Africa that they keep describing as a “ strange continent ”. For him, Africa is an “ inexhaustible well of fantasies “ where Westerners in search of exoticism come to quench their thirst⁶. This exoticism paradoxically has them benighted, sometimes deliberately, when it is combined with racism that prevents to truly discover and understand the Other.

Following in the footsteps of Achille Mbembe, Pierre Boilley raises the issue of an education open to the world in a French context. He wonders why Africa’s past is so little understood and why this ignorance “ continues and even worsens, opening the way for all kinds of stereotypes, for an Afro-pessimism that is alive and well, for a competition between memories and other peculiarities of the French debate ” (p.134). He analyzes the curricula, the topics of the high-level competitive examination for the recruitment of teachers and the importance of African studies in French research and universities. He castigates an education system that, according to him, does nothing to provide a “ minimum culture ” about Africa’s history and social realities.

⁶ The term “Westerners” covers here nationals of France, but also of the United States, of the United Kingdom and of any other European country that had contacts with Africa.

Yet, numerous are the scientific publications on Africa's history, as shown in the last chapter of this book written by Ibrahima Thioub.

Ibrahima Thioub is a Senegalese history professor at the University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar where Nicolas Sarkozy delivered his speech. Is it a mere coincidence or an intentional choice of the editor that his contribution is the last one of this collective book? It is hard to tell. Regardless, Ibrahima Thioub was one of the first African intellectuals who responded to Nicolas Sarkozy's speech by publishing an open letter to the French President. This book gives him a new opportunity to respond to the speech by presenting an annotated and detailed bibliography of seminal works on African history. This bibliography is accompanied by an analysis that highlights and explains the unilateral nature of the academic exchanges between North and South that are not in Africa's favor. According to him, this unilateralism reflects "the limited number of works on the continent produced by African scholars and the limited distribution of their publications because of the decline of local edition and distribution houses" (p.170).

This book deserves credit for sounding the alarm against ignorance about African history in the European, and particularly French, academic and political circles. It calls for a better understanding of the African peoples' past before any changes are made in the exchange and cooperation policies with Africa. But one cannot deny that his call was not without its weaknesses.

Indeed, this book gives the impression that the authors also ignore the realities of Africa. It can be criticized for presenting Africa as if it were a monolithic entity with one shared history. This is far from reality. These authors succumbed to a holistic approach and gave the deceptive impression that Africa was a coherent entity and that all the regions of the continent shared the same history. Aminata Diaw (2004) had highlighted the fact that "there is no coherent reality" in Africa and that we should rather talk about Africas instead of Africa. The book's authors, like President Sarkozy, did not take into account the pluralistic nature of African societies that have sometimes very different historical trajectories. It is in fact this diversity that explains the differences in reaction to the Dakar speech. While some African politicians like Alpha Oumar Konaré, former President of Mali and President of the Commission of the African Union, reacted negatively to the speech, others, like Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, congratulated President Sarkozy.⁷

⁷ André Julien Mbem (2007) thinks that Thabo Mbeki's reaction to the Dakar speech "subtly reveals Africa's new configuration" (p.13).

The pluralistic nature of Africa, of its societies and of their historical experience can be better understood if one takes into account North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. The historical dynamics of these large geographical areas of the African continent – that is not just a black continent – varied greatly at the time of the Slave Trade, more specifically of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. White Africa and Black Africa have not experienced these events in the same way. North Africans did not experience this episode of Black Africa's history, that of the Slave Trade. The onomastics of the name in French (“*Traite négrière*”) clearly indicates that only “Negroes” were targeted. Only Black Africans were deported to the sugarcane plantations of the “New World.” This example alone can call into question the idea of a “history of Africa” oft-repeated by President Sarkozy and taken up again by the authors of this book who, by putting forth a holistic analysis, give further proof of what Jean Copans (1990) has called the “muddled nature” of African social sciences. Because of this holistic approach, North Africa was kept at bay in this book. Most of the chapters focus on Black Africa. However, André Julien Mbem (2007) notes that the Dakar speech was “in general, for the whole of Africa” (p.20). The reader would have therefore expected contributions from authors or researchers working on North Africa; while the absence of a perspective from the English and Portuguese-speaking regions of Africa could be justified by the fact that the book was in French. A perspective from these other geographical areas would have allowed the book's authors to present additional arguments to demonstrate that African societies have indeed a rich history. An analysis focusing on North Africa would have certainly highlighted the work of the historian Ibn Khaldoun who, during the 14th century, completed a major work on the history of this part of the African continent (Lacoste, 1966). Unfortunately, Jean-Pierre Chrétien and his fellow contributors have kept silent on this rich historical legacy, just like President Sarkozy whose speech “remarkably demonstrates how the past can be used politically in order to position oneself against the Others.” (Bonniol, 2007).

The political manipulation of history: this is indeed a theme at the very heart of the Dakar speech, yet one that the authors did not consider fit to explore further, even though they do recognize that “generally, politicians do not talk about the past for history's sake, even when they refer to a collective ‘memory’, but in order to assert their authority and legitimize their actions.” (p.12). Starting from this premise, the reader was entitled to expect that this theme of the political manipulation of history not only be mentioned in this book written mostly by historians, but also fully developed from a theoretical perspective by focusing on the excesses of such a practice.

This book could have held up a mirror in order to better understand the dissenting attitude of most Africans towards the Dakar speech.

When writing President Sarkozy's speech, Henri Guaino made him invoke historical memory, but failed to take into account the fact that political manipulations of history can predominantly be found in nationalist or patriotic speeches. Indeed, referring to the manipulation of national sensitivities by the government and its allies in Romania, Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean (1995) notes that history, "considered as an 'ideological instrument to offset frustrations' makes a triumphant entrance on the political scene thanks to the nationalist discourse" (p.225). "Politicians manipulate history as they wish, choosing elements that, presented 'esthetically', are used for 'patriotic' purposes" (*ibid*). When they referred to history, Henri Guaino and President Sarkozy probably thought they were talking to their countrymen from the French overseas territories. They seemed to forget that the speech was delivered in front of an audience who has claimed independence from France, a country Africans are now wary of since the adoption by President Sarkozy of an immigration policy opposed to African (Black) nationals. This speech was thus delivered in a context that was not conducive to any reference to historical and/or collective memory, especially since this memory of Franco-African relations refers back to facts and events from which the former French colonies would like to free themselves. The writers of that speech failed to take into account the imaginative world of the nationals for the former French colonies who blame France for their political and economic malaise. This explains, to a large extent, their tumultuous reactions to the Dakar speech.

Nevertheless, these few shortcomings do not undermine the relevance of this book. The agitation and reactions following Nicolas Sarkozy's speech have demonstrated that a thorough knowledge of Africa, of the history of its societies, cultures and peoples are a *sine qua non* for the formulation of France's African policy, a policy devoid of any prejudice that could accentuate the inequalities and disparities that have characterized *Françafrique* since the end of the colonial era. Intellectuals and part of the African political class were thus right to invite President Sarkozy, who bears the heavy responsibility of implementing France's African policy, to learn about Africa in order to better negotiate with the continent.⁸ This was indeed the main purpose of this book.

⁸ ADAME BA KONARE, *Petit Précis de remise à niveau sur l'histoire africaine à l'usage du président Sarkozy*. Paris : La Découverte, 2008.

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