

Laughing at the Patois Bourgeoisie¹ by Massa Lemu

Introduction

*dem wi'gi' whey dem talent to di state
an'di black workin' class andahrte
dem wi' side wid oppressah
w'en di goin' get ruff
side wid aggressah
w'en di goin' get tuff
dem a black petty-booshwah
dem full of flaw*

—Linton Kwesi Johnson, “Di Black Petty Booshwah”

“Patois Bourgeois Minor Portraits” are a series of photographs that operate at the intersection of performance and its documentation, the surreal and the bizarre. I created this series in Malawi in 2016 to satirize and poke fun at the bourgeois practices of fellow elites in the African postcolony. In this essay I will discuss the formal and thematic aspirations of this work.

In “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” Frantz Fanon warns of the bankrupt and corrupt postcolonial national bourgeoisie, the comprador agents of neocolonialism who imbibed the values and tastes of their colonial masters without attaining the inventiveness and the industry of their counterparts.² The inept and corrupt elite are an impediment to the progress of the people. Chinweizu shares Fanon’s views in his seminal book *Decolonizing the African Mind*, in which he calls the postcolonial ruling elite the Ariels, borrowing from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. While Caliban resists Prospero’s colonization, Ariel serves his master obediently.³ The national elite are the new Ariels dutifully protecting their master’s interests. The Jamaican-British Dub Poet Linton Kwesi Johnson also sings about the superiority complexes of the self-serving black petty bourgeois who underrate and undermine the black working class. Johnson sings of the

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² As Fanon has observed: “the national bourgeoisie, with no misgivings and with great pride, revels in the role of agent in its dealings with the Western bourgeoisie. This lucrative role, this function as small-time racketeer, this narrow-mindedness and lack of ambition are symptomatic of the incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to fulfil its role as bourgeoisie.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963/2004), 101.

³ Chinweizu, *Decolonizing the African Mind*, (Lagos: Pero Press, 1987).

black middle class of Britain of the 1980s, but the same can be said of the African elites today who oppress the underclasses. Playing with the words ‘petty’ and ‘patois’, the label ‘Patois Bourgeois’ alludes to the idea of the postcolonial bourgeoisie as a hybrid product of Western and African values. In these images, abject humor and satire feature in ephemeral performances that critique the new postcolonial elites. As a member of the patois bourgeoisie, satirizing my own class means taking a step towards what American sociologist Steven Osuna, following Amílcar Cabral, called class suicide as a form of anti-capitalist critique.⁴ The label ‘Patois Bourgeois’ is used not as a derogatory term, but to highlight race and the hybridity of the postcolony in decolonial class-consciousness.

“Minor Portraits” employ an impoverished aesthetic, which involves the recuperation and reuse of discarded objects in short, impromptu performances. Some of the images were taken by amateur photographers using cheap phone cameras. Unlike the high-quality and glossy commercial portraits that are designed to glorify their subjects, most of these images are of particularly low quality.⁵ This aesthetic is meant to speak to the poverty that underlies the corruption, greed and theft among the upper classes. The images are meant to be rude, crude, and irreverent. They are also intended to be lowly and abject, serious and yet funny. They share the aesthetics of satirical African memes currently circulating on Facebook and Twitter. Usually composed of an image accompanied by brief text, these memes mock the follies in everyday African life, and they are used by the people to laugh at the ruling elites. Likewise, the “Patois Bourgeois” images are social media bound. Therefore, destined for Facebook rather than print media, the portraits stage a critique of the traditional practices of image making and distribution in a neoliberal postcolonial context where the archival image has been liberated from its propagandist national agenda and has been communized in the digital realm.⁶ Thus liberated, but not commercialized, the “Patois Bourgeois” image, like the meme, is a cheap and accessible image available for political usage by the public in the digital commons.

The New Askaris

Standing in a makeshift butcher’s stall made of wooden poles and corrugated iron, the besuited patois bourgeois monarch offers “dinner” featuring large carcasses of beef, and a “dessert” of two cakes (fig. 1). Made of kerosene stove tanks affixed with candles, the cakes are meant to resemble land mines more than anything confectionary. Shot from a low angle, the bespectacled figure towers over us, mouth agape as if in mid-incantation, and in a supplicatory gesture that emphasizes his authority. Reminiscent of the Irish-British painter Francis Bacon’s

⁴ Steven Osuna, “Class Suicide: The Black Radical Tradition, Radical Scholarship, and the Neoliberal Turn,” in G.T. Johnson & A. Lubin (eds.), *Futures of Black Radicalism*, (London: Verso, 2017), 21-38.

⁵ The term “minor portraits” used to refer to the series borrows from the Deleuzian concept of minor literature as a form of literature that works within and against a major form. Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986).

⁶ For a discussion about this subject see Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” in Franco Berardi et al (eds.), *The Wretched of the Screen*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

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reinterpretation of Velázquez's "Pope", any guest would think twice before joining in to participate in such a gory feast.



Fig. 1. "Dessert - Patois Bourgeois Monarch", 2016. Photo by Tavwana Chirwa.

Residing in the underbelly of the neocolonial order/ disorder is the despicable figure of the warlord (fig. 2). Glistening in golden watch and rings, wearing a gas mask, brandishing a Victorian bayonet, and yet barefoot, the "Patois Bourgeois Warlord" reveals the greed that has fueled incessant wars on the African continent. Clad in a grey business suit, the terrible patois bourgeois warlord sits smug and yet vulnerable in his regal chair in a murky basement that serves as his underground headquarters from where he commands his troops of child soldiers. The term warlord is not used without misgivings. In Western journalism, the warlord is talked about as if he is a peculiarly African phenomenon, but how this figure is tightly linked to the global capitalism should be emphasized. One might ask: why are there no warlords in the West when in fact the West is continuously waging wars across the globe? Is it because in the eyes of the world Africa is perpetually medieval? Taking over from their colonial masters, the warlords are the new agents of the neocolonial violence, destruction and plunder. In return, they are protected by a global capitalist order that profits from the violence and chaos that they perpetrate. As some Africanists have observed, rather than deal with legal state structures, some unscrupulous multinational corporations find it more profitable operating in the shadowy warzones beyond the strictures of fair trade, political entanglements, and social responsibility. This has been the case

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in war torn Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, and Sudan.⁷ Thus, the patois bourgeois warlord is a central figure in the corrupt neoliberal global dispensation.



Fig 2. “Patois Bourgeois Warlord”, 2017. Photo by Shannon Castleman.

⁷ James Ferguson, *Global shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

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In fact, nowadays, the postcolonial warlord is being overtaken by a new kind of crusader: the ostentatious evangelist pastor who comes in a different guise but who is supported by the same vicious neoliberal capitalist machinery. According to this patois bourgeois pastor's misleading logic, it is not due to social asymmetries and systemic inequalities that some people are poor, but rather because they are not praying enough, or are praying to the wrong god. As a promoter of bourgeois tastes and values, the ostentatious patois bourgeois pastor, who preaches about earthly rewards, is thus the neoliberal corporatist par excellence. Or rather, through him is revealed the collusion between religion and neoliberal capitalism to open up the African market and turn the African multitudes into subjugated consumers. The patois bourgeois pastor is always eager to show off his material wealth, most of which is attained through shady means.⁸ Flashy clothes, expensive jewelry and posh cars are paraded to bedazzle the faithful who are promised heavenly rewards if they give generous tithes.⁹ The pastor's ostentation is only matched by that of the politician. For instance, Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi, the poorest country on earth, used to ride around in a classic, out of place Rolls Royce. His successor, Bakili Muluzi rode the pitiable potholed roads in a state of the art Bentley. Fed up Malawians protested when the third president, Bingu Wa Mutharika decided to buy himself a luxurious jet on the government bill in a country where the airports are in a wretched state. Where there are no significant objects of material wealth, the patois bourgeoisie are eager to flaunt trinkets and other markers of rank and status. This showing off is done to bedazzle and amaze. But most importantly, it ensures the perpetuity of power in the imaginary of the poor.¹⁰ In the series under discussion, the patois bourgeois brandish various objects ranging from bayonets to stoves. These objects also have psychological implications as transitional objects¹¹ or objects of compensation, offering their owners emotional security, gratification, and comfort. As symbolically loaded objects, these items bring their own significations into the work, but they are also imbued with additional meaning by the performative gestures in which they are incorporated.

Pride and ostentation is captured in "Askari - Patois Bourgeois Technocrat" (Fig. 3). Wearing a brazier on his hip and hotplates as shoes, and consequently cutting a ludicrous figure, the askari proudly stands guard at the entrance of a corn granary. In colonial times the askaris (or the *kapitao* in Chichewa) were the native soldiers and policemen – the sellouts. Colonial sell-outs also included the clerks, teachers, warrant chiefs, and "the assimilés" who aped their white colonial masters.¹² During independence, these civil servants were incorporated in the new governments. At present, more and more people in Africa are realizing the independence they

⁸ Allegations of money laundering haunt the mega-rich Malawian Prophet Shepherd Bushiri who operates in South Africa. See "Allegations against me are false: Bushiri | SABCNewsOnline," *SABCNews.com*, April 16, 2018, <http://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/allegations-false-bushiri/>.

⁹ See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "Transitional Objects" is a term in Developmental Psychology that refers to objects that the child uses to sooth itself. See D. W. Winnicott, "The Observation of Infants in a Set Situation" in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* Vol 22 (Jan 1, 1941):229.

¹² The French term "assimilés" is used to describe the African elites who were assimilated into French culture through colonial education under France's assimilationist policy in its colonies. See Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

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gained in the 1960s was a sham. The liberators, who are actually the caretakers of the interests of the white colonialists, are the new askari. Thus, in “Askari”, the grotesque bourgeois technocrat is the custodian of the mines, game reserves, and parks for his neocolonial Western masters. Examples of the new askaris abound, but a notable one is Nigerian-born immigrant Toni Iwobi who was elected to the Italian senate on fierce anti-immigrant rhetoric.¹³ Iwobi is an askari guarding the borders of fortress Europe.



Fig. 3. “Askari - Patois Bourgeois Technocrat”, 2016. Photo by Tavwana Chirwa.

¹³ For more on this see Samuel Osborne, “Italy elects first black senator in history, for anti-immigration Lega party,” *Independent*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italy-elections-black-senator-elect-lega-nord-anti-immigration-party-toni-iwobi-brescia-lombardy-a8243736.html>.

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The patois bourgeoisie – the Ariels – are infamous for looting the national coffers and stashing them away in foreign lands. As Fanon has observed, the bourgeois “has no scruples depositing in foreign banks the profits it has made from national resources.”¹⁴ It is reported that upon his removal from power the despotic Gambian ex-president Yahya Jammeh made away with \$11 million from the state coffers and was also allowed to keep his fleet of thirteen luxurious cars. Once in a while, in different parts of the continent, stories abound where those suspected of vampirism are killed by mobs. Usually, the poor, the weak or those who cannot defend themselves are the victims of this mob justice. However, the greedy and carnivorous elites are the real vampires who fatten on the blood and sweat of the poor. In *On the Postcolony*, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe evokes French theorist Jean-François Bayart’s phrase “the politics of the belly” to describe the avarice, greed and excess that defines the self-serving elites through the metaphors of the mouth, the belly, the phallus, and the anus. According to Mbembe,

The emphasis on orifices and protuberances must especially be understood in relation to two factors. The first derives from the *commandement* in the postcolony having a marked taste for lecherous living. Festivities and celebrations are two key vehicles for indulging this taste, but the idiom for its organization, and its symbolism focus, above all, on the mouth, the belly, and the phallus. It is not enough, however, in this context of postcolonial *gouvernementalité* (to use Foucault’s terms), to bring into play the mouth, the belly, or the phallus, or to refer to them, to be automatically obscene. They are active statements about the human condition, and contribute integrally to the making of political culture in the postcolony.¹⁵

Fanon describes how, as a self-preservation tactic, the self-serving national bourgeoisie resort to tribalism, national chauvinism and the scapegoating of foreigners who are blamed for the socio-political and economic woes. This fuels xenophobic violence whereby the lives and properties of foreign small traders and laborers are destroyed by nationals who accuse foreigners of taking away jobs. “There is a general call for these foreigners to leave, their shops are burned, their market booths torn down and some are lynched...”¹⁶ Fanon’s prophetic words describe the scene of the post-independence 1960s in West Africa, but post-apartheid South Africa has recently seen similar ugly scenes of xenophobia fueled by some conniving ruling elites. In “Alien” (fig. 4), another besuited figure in a suit is seen trying to push a huge red steel tank in a grassy field, in the background of which is an unfinished, roofless building. Seen from the front, the tank, with its two huge holes, resembles the face of an extraterrestrial being, an alien abandoned by its ship and stranded in this nondescript field. Engrossed, the barefoot politician, who could not single-handedly dislodge this celestial giant, looks absurd in his futile act. As exemplified in this

¹⁴ See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. 102-103.

¹⁵ See Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. 106-107.

¹⁶ See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. 103.

image and others of the series, absurdist humor features as a critical strategy against bourgeois shenanigans.



Fig. 4. "Alien - Patois Bourgeois Monarch", 2016. Photo by Mervin Monelo.

Subversive Media

The "Patois Bourgeois" images are meant to unsettle the patois bourgeoisie. The images elicit laughter in those who encounter them, a laughter that is corrosive to power. As anti-bourgeois art, the work is not meant for bourgeois contemplation. Rather, it is a weapon against the patois bourgeoisie. Even where the bourgeois laughs, he does so at the risk of the embarrassment that comes with the realization that the joke is on him.

To avoid a Manicheism that compartmentalizes and mutually excludes the classes, it needs mentioning that there is interconnection and interaction between and among the upper and lower classes in Africa. While the gap that separates the rich and the poor is astounding, obscene

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wealth and ravenous poverty live in close proximity. With visions of redemption from poverty, the poor educate their sons and daughters who, through hard work, rise to serve their communities as teachers, doctors, engineers, and journalists. In the fluid and precarious order that defines the postcolony, some elites and members of the middle class fall off and join the ranks of the underclass. The oppressor class of the bourgeois is often eagerly supported by the oppressed classes. This is not to say that the poor are passive in their suffering but that sometimes they are complicit in their own subjugation.¹⁷ They have joined in the fray and picked up the appetites of, covet, and want to share in the spoils of the rich. In short, the bourgeois elite and the underclasses do not live in mutual isolation. Perhaps, the contradictions of their entangled relationship are highlighted during election season when the politicians need the poor's vote. In such instances, class suicide as a conscious act of delinking from bourgeois networks and relinquishing its values is important to thwart class domination.¹⁸

In the African postcolony the classes are also linked culturally. The Western educated upper classes do not completely discard their traditions. For example, the sick resort to both traditional and modern medicine. It is also common to hear about corporate businessmen consulting witchdoctors to grow and safeguard their businesses, or politicians carrying charms to protect themselves from their foes. For example, a prominent Malawian politician was once arrested for trespassing in a graveyard at night where he was allegedly seeking charms from witchdoctors to boost his dying career. Also, a story is told of a holy man of god who consulted a witchdoctor so that his preaching would roar with the gusto of a lion! Alfonso Dhlakama, the Mozambican warlord whose terrorism that plagued the country for 15 years was supported by apartheid South Africa, Portugal and the US, was rumored to turn into a flock of birds or a tree in the forest when pursued by assailants. Such contradictions define the patois bourgeoisie in whose lives the occult, sorcery, magic and myth blend freely with, shape, and are shaped by Western values, science and technology. In "Patois Bourgeois" performances, this is symbolized by the variety of objects such as amulets, totems, and masks that are wielded or worn by figures in business suits, to show how elements of the traditional and the modern are used to instill fear and to subjugate. However, while some of the bourgeoisie are deeply connected to their traditional origins, some seek to detach themselves from their old plebeian lives, choosing to live in gated compounds oblivious of the surrounding poverty. Through technology, they seek to link themselves to the Western glamour brought into their secluded households via the internet and TV. Sometimes, bourgeois aspirations are absurd to the extent that instances abound of the upper classes who forbid their children from speaking their African mother tongues, opting instead for colonial languages. The portraits are critiques of such absurdities, but rather than lamenting an essentialist precolonial *illo tempore*, they seek to do so cognizant of the hybrid character of the postcolony.

In "Spin – Patois Bourgeois Monarch" (fig. 5), the figure of the bourgeois monarch is working on an old, rusty Swan sewing machine. Tailors sewing on such machines are a common feature on storefronts in Malawian cities. But entangled in a mess of video spool which itself unfurls

¹⁷ See Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

¹⁸ See Osuna, "Class Suicide: The Black Radical Tradition, Radical Scholarship, and the Neoliberal Turn," in G.T. Johnson & A. Lubin (eds.), *Futures of Black Radicalism*.

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from a barbed wire roll on the floor, this figure is unusual. This is a politician engrossed in the act of disentangling himself from his own “spin”. Mass media propaganda is a major weapon for misinformation, opposition muzzling, the perpetuation of power and self-preservation by despots who are ready to do anything to remain in power. Sometimes the university is employed to promote such undemocratic agenda. Working in collusion with the despot, the patois bourgeois academic legitimizes state policy and in so doing promotes ideologies of foreign domination. In the series, this is illustrated by the basket wearing “Patois Bourgeois State Philosopher” (fig. 6), who is blinded by dogma and materialism, and who, to borrow from Gilles Deleuze, “speaks in the shadow of the despot and is “in complicity with the state”.¹⁹



Fig. 5. “Spin - Patois Bourgeois Monarch”, 2016. Photo by Tavwana Chirwa.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, “Nomad Thought”, in Donald B. Allison (ed.), *The New Nietzsche*, (Cambridge: MIT Press), 148.

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Fig. 6. “Incognito - Patois Bourgeois State Philosopher”, 2016. Photo by Tavwana Chirwa.

Meanwhile, the intellectual who criticizes the government is sidelined, persecuted, silenced. However, it is important to mention that in some instances, media as a tool is recuperated and used by the people against oppression. At present on the African continent, traditional propaganda outlets in the form of TV, radio, and newspaper cannot keep up with the rise of

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social media as a tool of resistance in the hands of the people.²⁰ The memes discussed above exemplify media subversion. For instance, their usage in the #Feesmustfall movements in South African universities shows how they can be effective communication and networking political tools. In fact, one can argue that the #Feesmustfall movement is one of the straws that broke the back of Zuma's corrupt rule. In other words, Facebook and Twitter played a significant role in the removal from power of Jacob Zuma of South Africa.

Conclusion

As Kwesi Johnson observes in his song quoted in the epigraph above, the black patois bourgeois are “full of flaw [*sic*]”! Where the poor people strive for betterment and progress, the inept, corrupt, and thieving elite thwart these aspirations. In the “Patois Bourgeois Minor Portraits”, laughter is mobilized in performances that incorporate discarded objects to critique this parasitical group. As commentary on the comprador agents of neocolonialism, the “Patois Bourgeois” series is intended to be an exercise in decolonization. The images do not exist in a vacuum. They share with and add a critical voice to an extant aesthetics of resistance deployed by the marginalized against domination.

About the Author

Massa Lemu is a Malawian writer who focuses on contemporary African art and a visual artist whose multi-disciplinary practice features text, performance and installations. Lemu is currently assistant professor of sculpture in the Department of Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. His writings have been published by *Third Text*, the *Stedelijk Studies* journal, artandeducation.net (e-flux), Center for Contemporary Art Lagos, and *Contemporaryand (C&)*. Lemu has a PhD (Visual Arts) from Stellenbosch University, South Africa. See more of his work at <http://massalemu.com>.

²⁰ This is exemplified by the recent remarks by Paul Biya's government, which has been in power in Cameroon for thirty-six years, blaming Cameroonian diaspora on social media for the violence that has rocked the country. See Tadiwa Madenga, “Government in Cameroon Blames ‘Diaspora on Social Media’ for Violence,” *OkayAfrica*, June 21, 2018, <http://www.okayafrika.com/cameroon-government-blames-diaspora-social-media-for-violence/>.