

## REFLECTIONS ON MODERN SOVEREIGNS

REVIEW ESSAY: JOSEPH TONDA. *THE MODERN SOVEREIGN: THE BODY OF POWER IN CENTRAL AFRICA*, TRANS. CHRIS TURNER. LONDON: SEAGULL BOOKS 2021, 456 P. ISBN: 9780857426888

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Max Weber defines the state as a human community which successfully lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate violence within a certain territory. In *The Modern Sovereign* (2021, originally published in French in 2005), Joseph Tonda asserts that this definition is not applicable in central Africa. For Tonda, one cannot speak of states like Gabon, Congo, or Congo-Brazzaville as having monopolies on violence (pp. 13-14). Rather, violence is endemic. Rogue militias and criminal gangs claim to be the 'legitimate' dispensers of violence as much as the state's military and police. And the latter, Tonda notes, are as likely to wantonly attack the populace as the former. Indeed, it is often the militias and gangs to whom the general populace turns for protection from the military and police (p. 14).

Tonda finds further reason to challenge Weber's definition of the state. Central African states, he observes, are not merely 'human' communities, they are places populated by vampires, zombies, ghosts, demons, ancestors and all manner of other phantasmagorical creatures. These non-human entities are as capable of causing violence as the weapons used by militants, soldiers and police. And by 'violence' Tonda is not speaking of symbolic violence, but real, physical violence (pp. 43-44, 219, 221). A tragic episode he recounts in the book stands as evidence to this: in 1994, 114 people died as the result of a stampede in a church in Brazzaville after the sighting of a phantom snake (p. 242). Tonda's book is full of such examples. Quite simply, in Africa spirits can kill.

It has been said that the Weberian theory of the state only applies to modern, capitalist states (pp. 16-17) and that for this reason it does not work in Africa, the continent where missionaries and modernism 'failed' (pp. 22-23). This is an argument Tonda seeks to explode with his idea of the Modern Sovereign.

The violence of central Africa, ordinary and occult, is not a sign that the projects of modernism and modernity (manifested through democracy, rationalism and capitalism) have

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failed (pp. 19, 22-23) Nor is it a sign of the persistence of African traditions from a pre-colonial, pagan past (pp. 16-17). Tonda writes that such ideas, once widely held by anthropologists, are utterly fallacious (pp. 19, 226). Central African culture is not something set against modern projects but a fully-fledged part of them (p. 237). It is for this reason that Tonda gives his African notion of sovereignty the epithet 'Modern'. He seeks to illustrate how the idea of sovereignty in central Africa is hybrid or, perhaps in a term more suited to Tonda's tone, syncretic.

In one of the most compelling passages of the book, Tonda suggests that European missionaries did in fact succeed in converting Africans to Christianity. However, rather than converting them to the Christian God, they succeeded in converting them to the Christian Devil. In other words, the missionaries effected a 'negative conversion' (p. 23). Christianity was not a force that 'tamed' or 'civilised' Africa; in fact, it was, and is, as much a cause of the proliferation of beliefs in vampires, zombies, witches, demons, and so forth, as any traditional beliefs (pp. 19, 22).

Missionaries came with a proposition—'accept our Christian God'. But as Tonda points out, this proposition of faith was accompanied by a prerequisite material proposition (p. 108, 166). That is, access to literacy, numeracy and other skills necessary to understand the proposition of faith. These self-same skills were those which permitted entry into the sphere of capitalist commerce. According to Tonda it is this fact which explains why many Africans were so keen to accept missionary education for themselves or their children (pp. 166-167). The missionaries, in educating Africans, familiarised the latter with the signs and values of the West—namely money and capitalism (p. 107)

Tonda goes on to suggest that Africans conceived of conversion as a sacrifice; a sacrifice in which they offered up their old gods and ancestors to the new God of the missionaries. And as in all sacrifices, the sacrificers expected something in return. The thing expected in this case was the products of capitalism, namely, boundless riches and material wealth, or to put it in other words, the Devil's bounty (pp. 106-109).

The other thing to remember about sacrifices is that, according to their logic, they create ongoing and oftentimes unceasing obligations—hence the central African maxim: 'a white man's work is never done' (p. 194). For Tonda it is no coincidence that the word for 'white man' in certain central African languages means 'one who counts' or 'keeper of accounts'. 'White man' is equivalent to 'creditor', or one who gets one into debt (p. 119). Here Tonda draws on the work of the linguist Émile Benveniste to note the etymological overlap between *croyance* ('belief') and *créance* ('debt'): the heavenly, incorporeal domain of religion and the spirit is linguistically tied to the dirty, earthly world of capitalism and commerce. This linguistic fact, also seen in the English 'creed' and 'credit', gestures to Tonda's contention that spiritual transactions cannot help but be accompanied by material ones. Belief entailed debt, spiritual agencies entailed merchandise, Christ entailed the Beast (p. 166).

The regime of the Modern Sovereign is one wherein spirit and thing, ideology and material are intermixed (p. 112). This intermingling can help our understanding that symbolic violence is also physical violence. Tonda gives two examples of this: a Jehovah's Witness who dies after he refuses a life-saving blood-transfusion following pressure from his church who see the blood of an 'Other' as diabolical; and a Pentecostal who refuses all traditional medicine

on the grounds that its efficacy derives from evil pagan spirits—i.e. the Devil (p. 34). This kind of violence, where spiritual agencies and diabolical monsters cause empirical harm, Tonda labels the ‘violence of the imaginary’. Here the imaginary does not mean the unreal but rather that domain in which the real and the unreal are indistinguishable (p. 45). These imaginaries, of which Tonda speaks, are as much Western in origin as they are indigenously African (p. 215).

Tonda proposes that we should understand this ‘violence of the imaginary’ through the notion of the fetish. Fetishism, as Tonda notes, fell out of favour with anthropologists in the first decades of the twentieth century. Its demise was expedited by Marcel Mauss who denounced the concept as a gross misunderstanding. Yet this, Tonda argues, is precisely what fetishism is—a *misunderstanding*, an analytically useful misunderstanding (pp. 24-25).

Tonda starts to flesh out his particular idea of the fetish by turning to its original main theorists: Charles de Brosses, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud (p. 25). After examining their uses of the notion, Tonda proceeds to synthesise what he sees as the essence of the fetish. (Auguste Comte is a curious omission given that Tonda is a francophone sociologist.) This essence is ultimately misunderstanding—it is mistaking the natural for the supernatural (de Brosses), it is mistaking exchange value for use value (Marx), it is mistaking another object for the proper object of sexual desire (Freud). Fetishism refers to the manner in which the inanimate and the animate, the material and the immaterial, the signifier and the signified, the real and the imaginary intermingle and become confused. Fetishism is the term used by Tonda to refer to this confusion (p. 29, 31, 55-56).

Thus, the ‘violence of the imaginary’, which is precisely that violence wherein the real and unreal compound, is equivalent to the ‘violence of fetishism’ (p. 13). It is fetishistic violence which is wielded by the Modern Sovereign, a violence predicated on the indiscernibility of the world of matter and the world of ideology, of things and of spirits (pp. 111-112).

The fact that the fetish is both tangible and intangible results in the peculiar quality that it can never truly be obtained. It is for this reason that fetishists go on acquiring more and more things as the desire to obtain the fetish can never be truly satisfied; hence why all fetishists are collectors, and all collectors fetishists (p. 31). In the central African context, this explains why the man of power is one who accumulates and collects in superabundance, be it money, clothes, cars, commodities, women, children, etc. (pp. 32-33).

Much of Tonda’s book is concerned with putting his notion of the ‘violence of the imaginary’ or the ‘violence of fetishism’ into action to describe how the Modern Sovereign secures his suzerainty over certain central African states. Tonda’s examples of the ‘violence of fetishism’ range from statues and portraits of presidents (p. 37), magical philtres (p. 81ff.), outlaw gangs who draw inspiration from cinema (p. 139ff.), to the human body itself (p. 175ff.). Common to all these examples of the ‘violence of fetishism’ is their visibility—they are all spectacular (p. 233). An extreme example of this quality is the belief that Gabonese president Omar Bongo Ondimba possessed a magical pair of spectacles that afforded him the ability to see his citizens naked, that is, the capacity to perceive and pre-empt the secret desires, plans, and motives of his enemies—he possessed a kind of preternatural panopticism as Tonda conceives it (p. 195).

In contrast to the spectacular violence of the Modern Sovereign stands the invisible, clandestine violence of traditional, ancestral sovereign power in central African societies. The latter is a violence characterised by the night, masks, spirits and secrecy (p. 233). Tonda repeatedly iterates that the beliefs and imaginaries which we find today in central African countries are not a result of any lingering pagan past. Today's imaginaries, which are capable of causing very real violence, are fully contemporary and modern—hence the Modern Sovereign's visibility in contrast to the subtler forms of pre-colonial sovereignty.

The very notion of the fetish also highlights this modern character. The term was used by European traders to refer to 'primitive' African religion, specifically the African's mistaken belief that divinity was material. As mentioned, for Tonda, the essence of fetish is that it is a kind of misunderstanding. Here is the irony: it was not the native Africans who had a mistaken understanding of divinity, rather it was Europeans who misunderstood African religion. Even if we think of fetishism in terms of lusting after an unobtainable object, the early European traders were far more guilty than the supposedly mistaken natives. While European traders may have chided Africans for trading gold for mere trifles, it was they who greedily sought a wealth believed to be contained within a particular shiny substance.

For Tonda, the fetish is crucially not an indigenous phenomenon. It is a European concept that took root in the syncretic environment of nautical trade. As such, the 'violence of the fetish' expresses the syncretic nature of the Modern Sovereign's power. Throughout his book, Tonda aims to dispel the old-fashioned, yet surprisingly tenacious view which seeks to explain the root of all the current ills of central African states by reference to their pre-colonial, traditional, witchcraft-infused past. This view must be extirpated: so Tonda thinks, and quite rightly too. It is a mindset that blames the political failings of African states on their very African-ness. For Tonda such an ideology is tantamount to a kind of 'theodicy', a theodicy which seeks to exonerate colonialism, imperialism and capitalism (p. 226). His notion of the 'violence of fetishism' certainly succeeds in dealing a stout blow to this view. Tonda's Modern Sovereign emerges as something that is particular to central Africa and yet not indigenously African in origin. It is something truly modern in the sense that it is a kind of sovereignty which is a part of the global capitalist world of the here and now.

Those readers who seek a neat summary of Tonda's conception of the Modern Sovereign will be disappointed: nowhere does he explicitly define the concept. Indeed, Tonda warns his reader (particularly Anglophone ones) against searching for definitions—such a search, he says, will be in vain (pp. 66-67). Instead, the amorphous figure of the Modern Sovereign slowly emerges over the course of the book. At times one does feel that Tonda's subsidiary concepts are a little too open. It is, for instance, unclear where the distinction between ordinary violence and 'violence of the fetish' exactly lies. Nonetheless, his central concept of the Modern Sovereign emerges in refreshing contrast to the classic formulations of Bodin or Hobbes. The Modern Sovereign of central Africa is not a unified power which is antithetical to the state of *bellum omnium contra omnes*. It is a kind of sovereignty sustained by this very state—civil war (p. 307).

One should note that his book is decidedly Francophone in its outlook. For instance, by 'central Africa' Tonda really means francophone central Africa—Gabon, Congo, and Congo-Brazzaville. This is not intended as a criticism—rather it is to wonder how Tonda's

Modern Sovereign concept might hold up when applied to Lusophone and Anglophone central African states. It is also to wonder whether his concept might not be extended more broadly still to other sub-Saharan African states, particularly as most, if not all, do not possess a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within their territories. While the original French is sometimes rendered into clumsy phrases (e.g. ‘des lieux non-lignagers’ is translated as the confusing ‘lineal non-places’ rather than ‘non-lineage places’), the translation on the whole succeeds in capturing Tonda’s enigmatic central figure—*le Souverain moderne*, the Modern Sovereign.

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