

Narrating African futures¹

Summary

Africa's demographical and economical growths are spectacular nowadays, as the continent will soon host a quarter of the working-age world population. The question of "African futures" is therefore a major geopolitical and economical debate, discussed as such by a great variety of discourses. Economists, historians, philosophers, novelists and artists have developed innovative ways of imagining, staging and narrating African futures, which give ways to utopias and dystopias, depending on whether Afro-optimistic or Afro-pessimistic views prevail. Thus very different discourses often share similar literary images, figures of speech, modes of arguing or of narrating that rhetorical as well as narratological analyses could usefully bring out so as to emphasize their common assumptions, ways of thinking and of imagining. This paper underscores the necessity to study the overlaps between economics and literature, prospective studies and fictions, or counterfactual history and novels on the topic of African futures.

Keywords : Africa – Future – Literature – Economy – Prospective

Les croissances démographiques et économiques sont aujourd'hui spectaculaires en Afrique, continent qui hébergera bientôt un quart de la population active mondiale. La question des futurs de l'Afrique est désormais un enjeu géopolitique et économique essentiel, discuté comme tel par une grande variété de discours. Économistes, historiens, philosophes, romanciers et artistes ont développé des manières innovantes de mettre en scène et raconter les futurs africains, qui suscitent des utopies et des dystopies, selon que prévalent les vues afro-optimistes ou, au contraire, afro-pessimistes. Ainsi des discours apparemment très différents partagent en réalité des images, des figures de style, des modalités argumentatives ou narratives semblables, que des analyses rhétoriques et narratologiques peuvent mettre au jour pour souligner quelles hypothèses sont communes dans les manières de penser, imaginer et raconter les futurs en Afrique. Cet article souligne la nécessité d'étudier les multiples chevauchements entre économie et littérature, fiction et prospective, histoire contrefactuelle et romans sur le futur de l'Afrique.

Mots-clés : Afrique-futur-littérature-économie-prospective

Text

There has been hardly a month, over the last ten years, without a major francophone newspaper or journal headlining on "Africa-in-the-becoming" and offering articles, interviews, reports or special issues on the topic of "African futures" [1]. Indeed many economists or scholars in demographical, political and geopolitical sciences as well as philosophers, writers and artists have released groundbreaking studies, essays, fictions or pieces of art dealing with contemporary demographical, economical and artistic outbursts in Africa [2]. Their aim is generally to sketch the expected outcomes of these mutations and to anticipate Africa's face or fate in the next coming decades.

Afro-Pessimism vs Afro-Optimism

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Two major trends can actually be drawn out of this profusion.

On the one hand, Afro-Pessimists underscore the extent of Africa's predicaments such as its running poverty and its unfair insertion into global markets, the subsequent increase of inequalities within African societies or between Africa and other continents, the multiplication of economical, ecological and health disasters, the surges of violence and the looming dangers of major conflicts or uprisings among desperate populations. In that perspective, the African demographical growth is often seen as a ticking bomb whose explosion and fallouts will soon reach Northern and Western societies through massive and uncontrollable migrations.

On the other hand, Afro-Optimists would rather focus on Africa's many assets such as its huge size (which could include both Europe, China and the United States within its borders), its incredible geological resources, its agricultural and industrial potentialities, its outstanding economical growth in many countries and, last but not least, its increasing demographical stock which marks it out as probably the next workshop of the world [3].

Globalization of Africa vs Africanization of the World ?

One can also observe that African futures in a globalized world are generally seen through two antagonist prisms. The first spectacles are Western or Eurocentric ones : under the impact of globalization, Africa is bound to become the "new Lion" or the "next Giant" by experimenting a path towards development already explored by previous leading continents of the world. But some contemporary African political scientists or writers would rather see contemporary globalization through the lenses of African historical traumas. In Achille Mbembe's and Sony Labou Tansi's views, for example, people of African descent were characterized for many centuries as wastable and interchangeable reified beings. But these historical and economical conditions are now extended to so many other human populations, that we could well be witnessing an "Africanization of the world" under the effect of neoliberalism [4]. Yet, no matter which understanding of Africa's position in a globalized world should prevail, Afro-Optimists as well as Afro-Pessimists share in the end a similar conception of Africa. Indeed, the continent is always seen as a tank, designed to fuel or to regenerate the world, depending on which resources – material, human or spiritual and artistic ones – are actually emphasized.

Three Points of note

If we now take a critical stand on these various approaches of "African futures", we can write down three observations.

Considering African futures : an illusionary break from colonial times ?

First of all, discourses generally assume that such a preoccupation is a rather recent one, which can be traced back at best to the African independences, when a new postcolonial era was opened by "decolonized communities now defining themselves by their relationship to the future" (Mbembe, 2010 : 19). The European colonial project was indeed confined within an historical paradox : in the Western library, Africa was frequently said to be a continent out of history, entrenched into some kind of perpetual present, and motivated only by a traditional reduplication of the past. Yet the black continent was also seen as a fallow land expecting the labour of a rich and brand new world. Therefore, the colonial project was fundamentally oriented towards the future, and it primarily conceived itself into evolutionary terms, as a "mission to civilize" in which progress meant westernization (Delavignette, 1962 : 188). The

colonial discourse then turned out to be a very complex one, often mobilizing both fiction and socio-economical or historical prospects to outline contemporary African mutations in near-futuristic terms.

Economics vs Literature : a questionable opposition ?

The second point of note is that two distinct discursive practices seem to prevail on the topic of “African futures”, namely economics and literature, without much interactions nor mutual dialogues between them. Yet many writers actually engage with both disciplines, displaying a double competence in literary writing and skillful economical analysis. To give but a few examples, Togolese economist, diplomat and politician Edem Kodjo won the Grand Literary Prize of Sub-Saharan Literature for his major prospective essay (*...Et Demain l’Afrique*, 1985), while Erik Orsenna, who was both trained at the Paris Foundation of Political Sciences and at the London School of Economics, is now a famous member of the French Academy who makes economical, ecological and geopolitical issues very accessible through his knowledgeable “short histories of globalization” such as *Besoin d’Afrique* (1992), *Voyage au pays du coton* (2006) or *L’avenir de l’eau* (2008). In a different manner, Cameroonian economist and essayist Célestin Monga became an internationally renowned author thanks to his travel diaries (*Un Bantou à Djibouti*, 1990 ; *Un Bantou à Washington*, 2007 ; *Un Bantou en Asie*, 2011) and through his philosophical essays (*Anthropologie de la colère*, 1994 ; *Nihilisme et négritude*, 2009). But he was at the same employed as lead economist at the World Bank (and recently recruited as Vice-Director of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization), publishing indeed important studies on macro-economics such as *Measuring Democracy : Creating an Index of Political Well-Being* (1996), *Sortir du piège monétaire* (1996) or *L’Argent des autres, Banques et petites entreprises en Afrique* (1997). More recently, Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr has published a hybrid essay, at the crossroads of economics, literature and philosophy (*Afrotopia*, 2016) and he also organized with Achille Mbembe two major conferences in Dakar, “Les Ateliers de la pensée” (oct. 28-31, 2016 ; nov. 1-4, 2017), while being a professor of Economics at the Gaston-Berger University of Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal [5].

Prospective vs fiction ?

As a corollary, the admitted distinction between economics and literature often lifts itself up to an opposition between “expertise” and “creative writing”, or between “prospective”, defined by its probability or plausibility, and “fiction”, which comes under the regime of mere imagination. Yet in their writing of various scenarios or in their use of certain metaphors (such as the bestiary naming various economical powers as “eagles”, “tigers” or “lions”), economists and prospective experts often use the very same discursive strategies as creative writers inventing characters and developing plots out of certain circumstances (McCloskey, 1999). And conversely, writers often rely on counterfactual or hypothetical scenarios to feed their fictions.

Correlating Literature and Economics

Building on these observations, this presentation aims at correlating literature and economics on the major topic of “African futures” by pointing out three complementary perspectives.

From the colonial archive to the contemporary production : recurrent ideas and major breaks

Since colonial discourse, in its institutional as well as in its literary expressions, already developed various prospects on “Africa-in-the-becoming” or on “the Future of Africa”, one should probably reread today’s production in the light of this colonial archive, to identify the recurrent ideas and topics, as well as the major notional or thematic breaks that occurred over the last century. Indeed, many colonial productions granted a major forthcoming role to Africa in XXth and XXIst centuries’ world affairs, and they could even imagine a complete reversal between Europe and Africa in terms of rule and domination. They also displayed fears and hopes which are still very vivid today in some discourses. For example, writers and sociologists feared that Africa’s demographical superiority would lead to an overthrow of European domination alongside with a triumph of racial miscegenation. Their hopes lied in the fact that a successful agricultural and industrial exploitation of Africa could lead to its prosperous integration to global markets, and therefore to an enhanced solidarity and loyalty of former colonies with European powers still exerting a major geopolitical influence.

Yet one could also identify some breaks from colonial to postcolonial times. For example, development was first conceived as “colonization” and “valorization”, while ecological issues were not really considered in the early literature on “African futures” : they only became relevant at the eve of the independences (notably with Romain Gary’s Goncourt-prized novel, *Les Racines du Ciel*, in 1956). Nonetheless, some of their early embodiments (like the tragic fate of African elephants staged by Gary) still fuel today’s preoccupation for wild life protection, even when they are conceived in the most futuristic terms such as Mike Resnick’s novel entitled *Ivory* (1988), whose plot – the quest for the huge tusks of a famous elephant killed in 1898 – involves Massai descendants and takes place in year 6303 of an undetermined Galactic Era.

One should therefore notice a major difference between colonial and postcolonial anticipation : in many colonial fictions, the futuristic innovations lied mainly in military techniques of massive destruction, and the narratives displayed manifest Eurocentric biases in their choice of characters, emplotment and hierarchical / raciological patterns of thought. On the contrary, postcolonial anticipation has fostered reversing perspectives and counterfactual plots, imagining the outcomes of an extension at a world scale of ancient Egyptian paganism, medieval Ethiopian Christianity or West-African Islam if historical circumstances had been different...

Applying literary analytical tools to discourses on African futures

Secondly, one should develop a literary approach of these various discourses dealing with African futures, be they fictional, non-fictional, economical or informational ones. They indeed often mobilize similar literary images, figures of speech, modes of arguing or of narrating that rhetorical as well as narratological analyses could usefully bring out so as to emphasize the common assumptions, ways of thinking and of imagining at work in the contemporary writing of African futures.

Confronting prospective studies with fiction and counterfactual history

Thirdly, one should compare the effectiveness and the heuristic effects of economical prospects with the ones of fiction or counterfactual history.

If one admits that scenarios developed by prospective economical studies about African futures, at the eve of the XXIst century, were based on major data and trends such as demographical, educational, political and sociocultural situations, as well as on astute analyses of external variables such as geopolitical, financial and economical environments,

one should be now able to identify which plausible scenarios proved themselves to be more accurate or sustainable than others. For example, the United Nations Development Program launched in 1999 a think tank named “African Futures” which involved a thousand persons, spread over 54 African countries, in various international workshops over 3 years to end up with the publication of a major prospective study in 2003 [6]. This study outlined four exploratory scenarios, respectively entitled “The lions are trapped”, “The lions are hungry”, “The lions come out of their den”, “The lions marked their territory”. Even if we are still a few years ahead of 2025, these 2003 scenarios should be compared with more recent ones [7].

Now, as far as creative literature is concerned, if one admits, as French critic Pierre Bayard remarkably argues in his most recent book (*Le Titanic fera naufrage*, 2016), that fictional works often contain strong anticipations of the future, one should also pay a great deal of attention to the various exploratory scenarios staged in their plots, from the early futuristic novels written about Africa’s becoming in the colonial era, to the most recent speculative fictions developed by African or African-American writers in postcolonial and postracial perspectives. Some novelists of the early 20th century precociously forecasted, for example, the decolonization of Africa as well as the rise of African Christian prophetisms in their fictions [8]. But novelists of the 19th century had also built some of their plots on the development of Islamic Wahhabism in Arabia and of Mahdism in Soudan, to stage the uprising of African peoples against European colonial powers. In André Laurie’s *Les Exilés de la terre* (1888), the Madhist insurgents thus interfere with the science-fictional great plan to magnetically attract the moon down to the earth on African soil. Emile Driant, also known as Capitaine Danrit, “the military Jules Verne”, went even further by imagining and narrating, over 1279 pages, the devastating invasion of XXth-century Europe with African troopers led by Abd-ul-M’hamed, a fictitious Wahhabite sultan making pioneering use of biological weapons (*L’invasion noire*, 1894). Closer to us, some African and African-American writers now favour “alternate history” over science-fiction by imagining a futuristic world where islamic Africa would have enslaved and colonized Europe and the United States, and not the reverse [9]. In their plots and afrocentric cultural visions, such fictions do not only rely on counterfactual processes (the famous “What If ?” hypothesis), they actually overlap with contemporary prospective research of the possible development of large, powerful and threatening Islamic states in Sahelian Africa [10].

Mapping and intersecting discourses

Mapping the various discourses dealing with potential / plausible / fictitious “African futures” implies therefore to scrutinize their borders, how they overlap with each other, how they ultimately differentiate themselves. It is an interdisciplinary project insofar as it brings together nonfictional, fictional and prospective pieces of writing into common rhetorical, narratological and poetical perspectives. Based on a multilingual corpus, dominantly accessible in french or in english, it should also connect different literary traditions, be they African, European or American, over the course of a century and a half, e.g. from Alexander Crummell’s lectures on *The Future of Africa* (1862) up to Felwine Sarr’s recent *Afrotopia* (2016).

As a constant pattern of thinking, narrating and imagining Africa’s place in the global world, an orientation towards the future lays indeed at the root of both black and white literatures and traditions of thought, and it could be apprehended in three complementary dimensions. *Afrotopianism* is first conceived as a new kind of utopia centered on Africa ; *Afroprophetism* then rises as a recurrent temptation to confer Africa with a special part to play in the fulfillment of human destiny ; and finally, *Afrofuturism* stands as the imaginary exploration of an afrocentric world, hopefully – or not enough yet – rid of all colonial and racial legacies.

Conclusion

Much scholarship has been dedicated so far to colonial and postcolonial utopias, religious prophetisms, and futurist artistic productions. It sometimes mentions African expressions or pieces of work dealing with African futures [11]. But no exhaustive study has been carried yet to correlate those three complementary dimensions of Afrotopianism, Afroprophetism and Afrofuturism which lie at the heart of many discourses in fiction and non-fiction, human or social sciences and literature, and which also give way to various alternative projects such as reversed or counterfactual representations of the world. Those three future-oriented dimensions actually embody the real power of fiction, namely, the power to plot and to stage various traditions or modes of thinking, in order to anticipate what could come next, bringing the unheard or the unexpected into our reality.

As far as they are concerned, contemporary writers, artists or scholars could also be made more aware of their common verisimilar ways of glossing on African futures. Contemporary “speculative fiction” or “alternate history” novels seem indeed to share many insights with counterfactual or prospective studies in their “emplotment” of narratives [12]. Reciprocally, literary texts are often quoted by historians to illustrate their views and arguments, but their aptness to anticipation is rarely taken into more serious consideration.

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Additional notes

[1] “Vues d’Afrique”, *Esprit*, n°317, Aug. 2005 ; *Revue XXI*, “Destins d’Afrique”, Oct. 2008 ; “Indispensable Afrique”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Manières de voir* n°108, dec. 2009-jan. 2010 ; “L’Afrique, future ‘hyperpuissance’ économique ?”, *Le Monde*, Oct 10, 2011 ; “L’Afrique, future grande puissance grâce à l’entrepreneuriat ?”, *Économie Matin*, June 6, 2012 ; “Afrique future”, *La Revue des deux mondes*, Sept. 2014 ; “Penser avec l’Afrique”, *De(s)générations*, n°22, May 2015 ; “Prévoir avec l’Afrique, agir dans le monde qui vient”, *De(s)générations*, n°23, May 2015 ; “Afrique, enfer et eldorado”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Manières de voir* n°143, Oct.-Nov. 2015 ; “C’est en Afrique que réside le futur de l’innovation”, *Le Monde*, March 2, 2016 ; “L’avenir du monde se joue en Afrique”, *Le Monde*, Oct. 21st, 2016 ; “L’avenir de l’art est en Afrique”, *Télérama*, march 18-24th, 2017.

[2] See, to name but a few, the “Art Intervention” initiated in 2004 by Nicolas Premier and Patrick Ayamam (<http://africaisthefuture.com>) or Cristina de Middel’s exposition, *The Afronauts*, which toured through Africa (Nigeria), Brazil, the United States and Europe (Spain, Netherlands, Germany, France) in 2012-2013 ; Abdourahman Waberi’s novel, *Aux États-Unis d’Afrique* (Paris, J.-Cl. Lattès, 2006) ; Sylvestre Amoussou’s movie, *Africa Paradis* (Paris, Tchoko7art, 2007) ; and also various essays by Jean-Michel Severino & Olivier Ray, *Le Temps de l’Afrique* (Paris, Odile Jacob, 2010) ; Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit, essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée* (Paris, Découverte, 2010) ; Michel Le Bris & Alain Mabanckou, *L’Afrique qui vient, anthologie* (Paris, Hoëbeke, 2013) ; Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia* (Paris, Ph. Rey, 2016).

[3] Lionel Zinsou, “Une vision optimiste de l’Afrique”, conference at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Paris), April 28, 2010, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xd417h_lionel-zinsou-une-vision-optimiste_news

[4] A. Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris, Découverte, 2013 : 17) ; S. Labou Tansi, *Encre, sueur, salive et sang* (Paris, Seuil, 2015).

[5] See in particular, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/27/dakar-s-apprete-a-accueillir-les-plus-grandes-figures-intellectuelles-africaines_5021626_3212.html, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/28/les-dix-penseurs-africains-qui-veulent-achever-l-emanicipation-du-continent_5021853_3212.html and the volume printed out of the first conference proceedings, Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr (dir.), *Écrire l’Afrique-monde* (Paris / Dakar, Philippe Rey / Jimsaan, 2017).

[6] Alioune Sow (dir.), *Afrique 2025. Quels futurs possibles pour l’Afrique au Sud du Sahara ?* (Paris, Karthala, 2003) ; *Africa 2025. What Possible Futures for Sub-saharan Africa ?* (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2003).

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[7] See for example, Such as *Lions on the Move : The Progress and Potential of African Economies*, a report released by the McKinsey Global Institute (<http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/middle-east-and-africa/lions-on-the-move>, 2010) ; *Growth with Depth : 2014 African Transformation Report* issued by the African Center for Economic Transformation, a think tank based in Ghana (<http://africantransformation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-african-transformation-report.pdf>) ; *Lions Go Digital* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2013, <http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/high-tech/our-insights/lions-go-digital-the-internets-transformative-potential-in-africa>) ; *Lions on the Move II : Realizing the Potential of Africa's Economies* (2016, <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/middle-east-and-africa/realizing-the-potential-of-africas-economies>) ; *Africa 2050 : Realizing the Continent's Full Potential* (Oxford University Press, 2014), as well as major geopolitical syntheses written in French by Sylvie Brunel (*L'Afrique est-elle si bien partie ?*, Paris, Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2014), Georges Courade (*Les Afriques au défi du XXI^e siècle*, Paris, Belin, 2014) or Serge Michailof (*Africanistan*, Paris, Fayard, 2015).

[8] Marcel Barrière, *La Dernière Épopée. Le Monde noir, roman sur l'avenir des sociétés humaines* (Paris, A. Lemerre, 1909); Paul Salkin, *L'Afrique centrale dans cent ans* (Paris, Payot, 1926).

[9] See, for example, Steven Barnes' Insh'Allah series, *Lion's Blood* (New York, Warner Books, 2002) and *Zulu Heart* (Warner Books, 2003) as well as Abdourahman Waberi's *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* (Paris, J.-C. Lattès, 2006). On counterfactual history, see Quentin Deluermoz & Pierre Singaravélou, *Pour une histoire des possibles* (Paris, Seuil, 2016).

[10] See, among others, Samuel Laurent (*Sahelistan*, Paris, Seuil, 2013) ; Serge Michailof (*Africanistan*, Paris, Fayard, 2015) ; Olivier Hanne & Guillaume Larabi (*Jihâd au Sahel*, Paris, Bernard Giovanangeli Éditeur, 2015).

[11] See, for example, André Vauchez (ed), *Prophètes et Prophétisme* (Paris, Seuil, 2012), which includes a chapter on African Prophets ; or Jean-Marie Seillan's monograph (*Aux sources du roman colonial (1863-1914) : l'Afrique à la fin du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Karthala, 2006) which notably refers to André Laurie's and Émile Driant's novels, but not to Marcel Barrière.

[12] I borrow the notion of "emplotment" from Hayden White's *Metahistory* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

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