
Book Reviews

Two reviews of V. Y. Mudimbe. *The Invention of Africa*, Indiana University Press Bloomington, Indiana. And James Currey, London, 1988

The Subvention of the Invention of Africa

Kwesi Prah

*Colonialism is dead !
Long live the new colonialism
Flagged with the banner of universalism
under western tutelage... (Kwame Walata)*

*I want to be free and equal
But cannot leave old master... (Anon)*

Introduction

It is unfortunately not often that scholarship on Africa, or rather by Africans on Africa, both in Africa and in the diaspora, which scintillates, gemlike, or soars in stature, in compositional intricacy and verbal facility appears for public consumption. We are referring in this respect not only to language and expressiveness. Rather, we are thinking more of the organic character of the knowledge which is presented and its encyclopaedic breadth, the sheer volume of its learning, and its ability virtually to stand, blow by blow, the best that can be called into comparative witness from anybody, anywhere else in the world. The regular feature of African scholarship has been possibly more often rather spare on learning and encyclopaedia and too often over-generous in textual and facile philosophical regurgitation. Mudimbe's text, 'The Invention of Africa' is exceptional in learning, reading and presentation.

Mudimbe sets himself in this text, a task and a half, and rises to the occasion as a master of his concerns and much of what he surveys, in spite of the fact that there are important and significant weaknesses in his overall position and in some matters of detail. As he says in his introduction ;

The book attempts,.....a sort of archaeology of African gnosis as a system of knowledge in which major philosophical questions recently have arisen : first concerning the status of traditional systems of thought and their possible relation to the normative genre of knowledge. From the first chapters, which interrogate Western images of Africa, through the chapters analyzing the power of anthropologists, missionaries, and ideologists, to the last, on philosophy, I am directly concerned with the processes of transformation of types of knowledge (Introduction. Page X)

Mudimbe is as much an artist as he is a thinker, and I mean it here in a complimentary sense, although there are those who may argue to good effect that the two categories are essentially mutually exclusive. Whichever way one looks at it, one clear and undeniable steadfast fact about the inventor of 'The Invention of Africa' is that almost giraffe-like, he stands with his doubtlessly exceptionally erudite text, a head and a long neck above the academic lilliputians and the scholastic pedestrians who happen to be too many for any good in contemporary Africa. Like a giraffe, he sees very far and very well but sometimes misses the reality of his immediate universe. Like an archaeologist he unearths buried and forgotten knowledge and experience embossed and enshrined in priceless cognitive artifacts.

At the discrete analytical level, where isolated notions and elements of discourse are scrutinized, Mudimbe comes out with full marks and flying colours. He disentangles propositions and contextual imperatives with skills and a mind subtly imbued with dialectical finesse and verbal propriety. It is at the level of synthesis that he falls short. The analytically disentangled pieces are not sufficiently glued back, the epistemological jigsaw puzzle never achieves the sort of unity which permits the reader to concretely conceive Mudimbe's philosophical bearing conclusively.

The Chemistry of an Eclectic

Mudimbe's prodigious reading in a sense overwhelms him. One loses his views in the views of others. Sometimes, the readiness to refer to sources is taken to a fault. For example, (Page 92) in the middle of the text, Mudimbe points out that; 'The political image of Africa after 1965 is indeed distressing. Authoritarian regimes have multiplied, rules and norms of democracy have been fluted or rejected'. We are referred to Gutkind, Wallerstein, O'Meara and Carter. What is said is so well known and so well understood by any observer of contemporary African history that one is at a loss to see why credit is given to the above authors with regards to these views. On the same page, we are told that ; 'Toure was isolated in his dictatorship and Nkrumah, challenged and insulted, died in exile'. We are referred to Erica Powell. Erica Powell, in her autobiography reveals a lot about her long service to Nkrumah which is to say the least very revealing, interesting and informative. But, the above points brought forward by

Mudimbe are common knowledge. Do we need Erica Powell to know this? Mudimbe could have as well simply stated this.

He appears overeager and too ready to call others to witness by a selective evidential method, in which key confirmatory or disputative passages are recalled with albeit a precision which the best surgeon operating on the human body would be hard put to rival. His witnesses, whether for the prosecution or the defence say just what and how much he wants them to say, not one word more or less. This is of course superb craftsmanship. But, the whole message or evidence of such witnesses is lost. In effect, too many of them say what they do not really intend on the whole to say. Such procedures are artistically permissible. They form the substance and technique of the collage. But as a scientific mode it is dodgy or, to say the least, contentious. For some, it may appear to be a technique of over-summarization of more detailed and complex issues. For others it may be almost heretical. But hearsay may be historically a viable course of progress.

The implicit philosophical basis of such notional collation which Mudimbe is obviously a master of and has crafted to such eloquent sublimity, is eclecticism. While it permits the richness and ideological tapestry of a philosophical Tower of Babel, it excludes conceptual and methodological consistency. As Marvin Harris noted years ago in his *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, 'eclecticism is certainly the path of least resistance through the frequently strident polemic of the system-mongers'¹. What however needs to be pointed out is the fact that, not all eclectics consciously adopt such positions in order to avoid the minefield of argumentation with nomothetic thinkers, system-builders and 'grand-theoreticians'. Many are philosophical sceptics who are generally suspicious of whatever may appear to be all-embracing approaches to scientific analysis. Others are plain inductionists who prefer 'multi-dimensional' approaches inspired by the use of 'all available techniques'. In the introduction to his study, Mudimbe invokes the views of Foucault to attest to his approach. He writes that ;

...from a methodological viewpoint I think, as Foucault put it, that 'discourse in general and scientific discourse in particular, is so complex a reality that we not only can but should approach it at different levels and with different methods'. For this essay, I have chosen an archaeological perspective that allows me to address the issue of the progressive constitution of an African order of Knowledge. However, for reasons having to do with the bizarre nature of some of

1 Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. New York. 1968. P. 284.

the sources used, mainly the anthropological ones, I have preferred not to distinguish the epistemological level of knowledge from the archaeological level of knowledge. (Introduction. Page XI-XII).

The spontaneity and volitional approach to methodological issues is grounded ultimately in philosophical quicksand. Eclecticism collates and catalogues, without a firm systemic grid. Thus for Mudimbe, the Belgian scholar B. Verhaegan 'is both a Marxist and a Catholic' (Page 178). There is here apparently no contradiction. Fanon, Mudimbe suggests was 'a solid Marxist' (page. 92). Fanon like many of his generation was affected by the existentialist thinkers, and also Hegelianism and Marxism, but he can hardly be described as 'a solid marxist'. The limits of his theory of nationalism and culture, the Sorelian character of his concept of revolutionary violence reveal wider philosophical affiliation than 'solid marxism'.

Few social scientists have pointed to the pitfalls of eclecticism with the succinct and unmitigated forthrightness of Harris. He writes that ;

Eclecticism,...abounds with hidden dangers. In practice, it is often little more than a euphemism for confusion, the muddled acceptance of contradictory theories, the bankruptcy of creative thought, and the cloak of mediocrity. It bestows upon its practitioners a false sense of security and an unearned reputation for scientific acumen. Science consists of more than responsibility to the data; the data must be responsible to theory. Neither one without the other suffices. It is impossible to be faithful to the facts and at the same time indifferent to theory².

Technically, Mudimbe is an analytical mind of exquisite quality. But because of his philosophical eclecticism and the theoretical limitations or impositions of this, the continuity of analysed units of discourse is undermined and ruptured. The collation as a thought-continuum is segmentary and ultimately truncated. This weakness runs almost consistently throughout the text, except to a much lesser degree, in his discussion on 'The Missionary Discourse and Africa's Conversion' (The Power of Speech), where the philosophical and analytical integument of his exposition is systematically liberated and achieves consistency and homogeneity.

Mudimbe's reading of the debates triggered by Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy*, Griaule's work on the Dogon, and the reactions of Mbiti, de Hemptinne, Kagame, Diop, Tshiamalenga, Dieterlen and de Heusch is succinct. His conclusion here can hardly be faulted;

2 M. Harris. *Ibid.* p. 285.

I am personally convinced that the most imaginative works that reveal to us what are now called African systems of thought, such as those of Dieterlen, de Heusch, and Turner, can be fundamentally understood through their journey into Einfühlung. In the case of African scholars, it often becomes a case, as with Kagame correcting Tempels, or sympathy towards oneself and one's culture (Page 145).

The 'journey into *Einfühlung*', we must remember, started from 'the primitivist tradition'. In itself it represented progress within its own historical context i.e. the late colonial period. It is a journey almost as distant as the journey from evolutionism to functionalism. Kagame, Lufuluabo, Mujynya and Mulago are not mere intellectual gobemouches of Tempels. In sympathy with their cultures which have for so long been denigrated by the westerner, they attempt to polish in the context of their historical conjuncture the then new approach to 'the other'. They claim a gnosis which will authenticate and rehabilitate their culture especially in as far as ontological issues are concerned. They claim a gnosis which will authenticate and rehabilitate their culture especially in as far as ontological issues are concerned. They ultimately, together with most of the ethnophilosophers, the negritude philosophers and negrologues, belong to the populist ideological mould which in the era of late anti-colonial and early post-colonial nationalism articulated the strength of populist consensus and Afrocentric reaction to retreating western colonialism. Idealization of the past is a hallmark of populism. Indeed the 'retrojection' which Towa accuses the ethnophilosophers of is a classic feature of the populist ideological edifice (Page 158). They share together with the functionalists one major weakness among others. This is that, they are methodologically ahistorical, creating reified and timeless images of the African reality reconstructed within the framework of 'the ethnographic present'. The methodological and substantial crudities of Tempels and his disciples' contributions to the analysis of African traditional thought systems, do not detract from, in the first place, the need to undertake this task, and secondly the considerable degree of preoccupation centrality which these issues continue to enjoy in the African mind in the post-colonial era. Obviously, *weltanschauungen* in themselves do not constitute composite philosophical constructs, but they are subject to philosophical analysis. I would go as far as suggesting that they represent primary areas of concern if the enterprise of philosophy in Africa is to engage the essence of African culture, society and history. In other words there is little point in Africa philosophers simply integrating themselves into western concerns and competing for audience on the western preoccupation platform. The analytical tools may well be universal, but the point of focus must have historical and sociological relevance. We are saying that, Socratic philosophy was not concerned in sociological focus about issues in China; the Utilitarians were concerned

with issues of emergent western industrial society; the Existentialists were responding to the *angst* inherent in modern western society; the Enlightenment philosophers were in the main preoccupied with considerations which found expression in the French Revolution and its aftermath. We are here in agreement with Mudimbe when he places the issues raised by Eboussi-Boulaga on the origin, identity and being of the African, on the critical philosophical agenda (Page 153). Hountondji's demolition of the ethnophilosophical position has been sound, and Mudimbe accords him careful attention. But, the weakness in Hountondji's position, his willingness to identify his position both formally and contextually essentially within the western epistemological field has rightly opened him up to criticism for western dependency and neo-colonialism. When Hountondji announces with aplomb that; 'we have produced a radically new definition of African philosophy, the criterion being the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content' (Page 159), he in one fell swoop attempts to obliterate the contradiction between the universal and the specific; the specific being 'the invented Africa'. The message is that, there is nothing worth the name in the African field, join the so-called universal philosophical crusade under western eyes.

Elitism would be a misnomer for Hountondji's disease, unless his accusers see both themselves and the accused as part of the western intellectual world. Mudimbe's discussion of the thinking of African clerics shows close familiarity and sound understanding and his mind appears to be at its best in these sections of the text (*The Patience of Philosophy*).

One area in this text where the absence of clear philosophical bearing and an absence of methodological coordinates is most emphatically felt is in his analysis of some of the principal 'socialist' leaders Africa has seen since the era of independence, and his discussion of 'Marx Africanized'. In Senghor's system, 'anthropologist's speculations are inter-alia, combined with Marxism'; In Nkrumah, the 'African Personality ideology gave rise to the ambiguous social philosophy'; we are told that, 'when prominent leaders such as Senghor or Nyerere propose to synthesize liberalism, idealism and materialism, they know that they are transplanting western intellectual manicheism' (Pages 1984-1850). I am not so sure if they know this. The ambiguity of these philosophical concoctions can be understood essentially within the concept of populism. The mixing of political ideological strands in the name of African Socialism is a feature of the class character of the dominant groups which have over the past three decades supervised the post-colonial state in Africa.

To be or not to be

At heart, Mudimbe's study wrestles with a number of key propositions struggling to achieve the status of plausible assumptions. Very early in his

text, our attention is drawn to the fact that, 'until now, Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order'. Undeniably, he explains, as any serious examination of the facts will reveal, 'even in the most explicit Afrocentric descriptions, models of analysis explicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order'. This order, in foundation and historical edifice has created 'the other', a beast which is neither fish nor fowl. The invention of this unicorn as Mudimbe amply shows was part of the Western encountering experience, and nearer our times, colonialism in particular. The inventors were not only the adventurers and travellers of earlier times but also the more intellectually astute and trained minds who dabbled in colonial anthropology.

From Herodotus, Diodorus of Sicily, and Pliny of classical Europe through John Lok in the 16th century, the western mind has been satisfied to feed on the idea of Africans as not quite human. Some were 'people without heads, having their eyes and mouths in their breast'. Others were, 'headless, satyrs, strapfoots' still others, were 'cave-dwellers who have no language and live on the flesh of snakes' (Page 71). As Mudimbe points out, the 19th century anthropologists were evidentially firm in their depiction of 'the essential paradigm of the European invention of Africa:Us/Them'. No lesser a figure as Herbert Spencer upheld the view that;

According to Lichtenstein, the Bushmen do not 'appear to have any feeling of even the most striking changes in the temperature of the atmosphere'. Gardiner says the Zulus 'are perfect Salamander', arranging the burning faggots with their feet and dipping their hands into the boiling contents of the cooking-vessels'³.

Attention can also be drawn to another not insignificant figure in anthropology, Lewis Henry Morgan. Carl Resek has 'pointed out that in 1850, concerning the fate of Africans in America, he expressed the view that;

....it is time to fix some limits to the reproduction of this black race among us. It is limited in the north by the traits of the whites. The black population has no independent vitality among us. In the south while the blacks are property, there can be no assignable limit to their reproduction. It is too thin a race intellectually to be fit to propagate

3 Herbert Spender, *Principles of Sociology* (1876). 1906 Edition. New York. Vol 1. p.50. Further on in the same text, while discussing what he considered to be the limited intellectual capacities of primitive peoples he recalls Sir Richard Burton into evidence; '...with Negroes. Burton says of the East Africans, "ten minutes sufficed to weary out the most intellectual" (Ibid. p.83).

*and I am perfectly satisfied from reflection that the feeling towards this race is one of hostility throughout the north. We have no respect for them whatever*⁴.

Levy-Bruhl's prelogical primitives, Malinowski's acculturating and detribalized natives, are all part of the order of 'the other'. During the heyday of the African independence movement in the early part of 1959, the cultured English writer Evelyn Waugh was peddling as recollections of his travels and adventures in Africa and, as part of what he had learnt about the eastern coast of Africa during a visit; that in the 16th and 17th centuries, when Arabs, Turks and Portuguese were contending for over-lordship of the East African coast particularly around Mombasa and Malindi;

*...for several years a ferocious cannibal tribe from south of the Zembesi, called the Zimba, had been making a leisurely progress up the coast, eating their way through the inhabitants. They appeared on the mainland just as the Portuguese fleet anchored off the island. The Turks invited the Zimba to cross over and help against the Portuguese. The Zimba came, ate the Turks and, gorged, shambled away to the north, leaving Mombasa to the Portuguese. They were repulsed at Malindi and disappeared from history*⁵.

When the evolutionists and diffusionists in the nineteenth century, and later the functionalists in the twentieth century brought the African from the back of beyond, it was to 'repress otherness in the name of sameness', strip 'otherness' of its more conceptually outlandish and atavistic baggage and in effect attempt to 'fundamentally escape the task of making sense of other worlds' (Page 72). While arguably, both Anglo-Saxon functionalism and Gallic structuralism are inherently teleological and represent a move from emphasis on 'the other' towards 'the same', the point which Mudimbe does

4 Carl Resek, *Lewis Henry Morgan : American Scholar*. Chicago. 1960. p. 63.

5 Evelyn Waugh, *A Tourist in Africa*. London. 1960. P.49. He writes elsewhere that concerning the Islands of Kilwa Kisiwani, Songo Mnara and Sanji ya Kati, 'The Persians probably came here first and set up a dynasty in the tenth century. It was under the Arabs of Oman that the place became great. The Portuguese came there at the beginning of the 16th century. In 1589 (mine underline) the Zimba ate all the inhabitants and left a waste that irregularly reoccupied (Ibid.p.75). Waugh attributes the authenticity of the story to Mr. Kirkman (the well-known Archaeologist), who 'exuberant enthusiast for the comic as well as for the scientific aspects of his work' (p.48),....'gleefully recounted' (p.49)....'This vivid little history was conveyed to us....with infectious but inimitable zest by the Director of Antiquities' (p.51). James S. Kirkman is hardly unique. Hamo Sasoon in a review of Kirkman's, *Fort Jesus : A Portuguese Fortress on the East African Coast*, Clarendon Press, 1974, informs us that : 'Dr. James Kirkman spent twenty-four years on the coast of Kenya, and of these, fourteen were spent in Mombasa focussing (to quote Sir Mortimer Wheeler) his "skill and almost infinite labour" upon the history of the great Fort'. See *Azania. Journal of the British Institute in Eastern Africa*. Vol XL. 1976. p.196.

not make is the fact that this escape is not accomplished not because of sheer 'limiting ethnocentrism' or 'epistemological determinism'. The creation of 'the other' was a western project, the unification or synthesis of 'the other' and 'the same' historically and dialectically represents the negation of 'the same' as a western product. The new sameness cannot historically be inspired by the old sameness but by its historical anti-thesis. I would emphatically add that this process historically has an intermediate stage or position, where 'the other' has an epistemological order for-it-self. It is only when and after 'the other' defines itself for-it-self that the epistemologically useful negation of occidnto-centric scholarship comes historically on the agenda. I shall revisit this point.

Mudimbe goes to considerable extent in his search for the route forward to an epistemological universalism which will historically outdate upstream the limitations of the past. He cautiously suggests that;

It is surely possible, as functionalism and structuralism proved, to have works that seem to respect indigenous traditions. And one could hope for even more profound changes in anthropology.....'

Mudimbe is obviously not very convinced himself that indeed functionalism and structuralism respect native traditions. They 'seem to respect' are his words, and indeed they only 'seem to respect' the native and his/her lore. The native is no longer six months or a year away from London, in Equatorial forests or harsh deserts, as distant from western civilization as the earth is from the moon. The native is only a few hours flight from London. The conditions of his/her life and mode of livelihood, directly affects the life of the westerner in depths of the concrete jungles of the western world. Stories about man-eating Zimbabwes sweeping along the East African coast eating all humans on sight cannot be pressed into currency however ostensibly authoritative the source may be in the age of the radio and television. Functionalism pleads that the native can and should be understood in his/her own cultural or societal context. The native is different but not a monster, he/she is a neighbour and we know that he/she does not have eyes in the breast. He/she remains 'the other' although less conceptually remote. As Harris observatively notes, between 1930 and 1955, the overwhelming majority of studies and contributions of the structural-functional school was grounded in fieldwork undertaken in European controlled Africa, particularly in the British administered territories. He points out that,

Under such circumstances it is impossible not to draw a connection between the proposal to study social systems *as if* they were timeless, with

sponsorship, employment, and indirect association of the members of U.S. school by and with a now defunct colonial system⁶.

In both Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's *African Political Systems* (1940), and the Introduction to Forde and Radcliffe-Brown's *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, we are advised that these texts are not merely for anthropologists but also those involved in colonial administration. The point must not be lost on us that, 'the other' in the era of functionalism is the colonized or neo-colonized. Structuralism as we know it today, is very considerably a contribution of the French anthropological tradition. Like functionalism, its roots lie with Durkheim, with the continuity rendered in the work of Mauss particularly in *The Gift*, and subsequently by his student Levi-Strauss who refined the methodological underpinnings of the approach to excellence in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Levi-Strauss the giant of French structuralism recognizes the binary character of structure for the anthropologist and his/her study object or phenomenon. The native remains 'the other' an object of western creative genius, scrutiny and rationalization. As Homi Bhabha has eloquently put it, 'an authorized version of otherness'⁷.

Mudimbe is of course right when he points out that;

.... so far it seems impossible to imagine any anthropology without a western epistemological link. For on the one hand, it cannot be completely cut off from the field of its epistemological genesis and from its roots; and, on the other hand, as a science, it depends upon a precise frame without which there is no science at all, nor any anthropology (Page 19).

I would go as far as saying that, the western epistemological genesis and link will remain. It cannot be denied or wished away. Mankind can only be thankful for it, whatever its shortcomings may be. It is part, but only part of the raw material for a future universal epistemological fund and subject to radical reinterpretation. What is more important is what African scholars, or for that matter non-western scholars do with it. In as far as western epistemology autonomously defines 'the other' from its own Eurocentric crucible, 'the other' remains a caricature, a Caliban of the western mind. As Bhabha would have it, 'a reformed recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*'⁸. It is only through the scholastic counter-penetration of the existent epistemological field that

6 M.Harris.op cit. p.516.

7 Homi Bhabha. "Of Mimicry and Man : The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *Oc ober*. Cambridge, Mass. No.28. Spring 1984. pp.125-133.

8 Homi Bhabha. *Ibid*.

dialectical process towards universalism is completed. No amount of facile, faithful or clever mimicry would resolve this contradiction. But how is this to be achieved?

Mudimbe addresses this problem only in bits and pieces, fighting shy of the fuller and more profound implications of the problem. Summoning the voice of Levi-Strauss and the spirit of Rousseau, he proclaims that: 'Nothing is settled; everything can still be altered. What was done, but turned out wrong, can be done again. The Golden Age which blind superstition had placed behind (or ahead of) us, is in us' (Page 34). He then attempts to resolve the contradiction between 'the same' and 'the other', by invoking Paul Ricoeur's *Cri de coeur*, inviting us under the inspiration of the sign of Plato's 'great class' which itself 'associates the Same and the Other. The Similar is the great category. Or better, the Analogue which is a resemblance between relations rather than between simple terms'⁹ I would argue that Ricoeur's outspoken epistemological conscience given the intellectual currents and trends of our times in the western world represents a voice in the wilderness. Carl Sagan's epistemological ethnocentrism with regards to Sagan's denial of the historico-cultural authenticity of Dogon cosmology in respect to their Sirius mythology is more in character with western images of the African even today. There is still much life in 'the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from them, unless it is already ours or comes from us' (Page 15)¹⁰. For Mudimbe, Foucault's wish to interrogate the western will lead to truth and restore to discourse its impact as an event, and 'abolish the sovereignty of the signifier'; and

9 P.Ricoeur. *The Reality of the Historical Past*. Milwaukee. 1984. p.25. Quoted here from Mudimbe. Op cit. p. 34. Ricoeur's awakening is well recalled by Mudimbe: 'The fact that universal civilization has for a long time originated from the European center has maintained the illusion that European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture. Its superiority over other civilizations seemed to provide the experimental justification of this postulate. Moreover, the encounter with other cultural traditions was itself the fruit of that advance and more generally the fruit of Occidental science itself. Did not Europe invent history, geography, ethnography, and sociology in their explicit scientific forms'.... When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an "other" among others'. P. Ricoeur. *History and Truth*. Evanston. 1965. pp.277-278. Quoted here from Mudimbe. Op. cit. pp.19-21.

10 I recall with cynical hindsight my experience in Cape Coast University, Ghana, 1974-75, where in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, a young American Africanist with a smattering of Twi (Akan) was supposed to be teaching the Social Structure of the Ashanti to undergraduates. This phenomenon is as absurd as visualizing an African sociologist teaching German students in a German university in Bavarian, the social structure of Bavarian society. Scholarship today would regard in all likelihood the former example as 'normal' or acceptable. Indeed, this is precisely the route to an eventual chair in 'African Studies' in the western world. The latter case is likely to provoke laughter at the patently surrealistic.

Levi-Strauss's attempt to conceive empirical categories that can be used as keys or indicators 'to a silent code, leading to universals' break the initial ground for the crusade towards the unity of 'the same' and 'the other'. Mudimbe's discussions here and in this respect, read more like articles of faith than the result of dialectical processes and smack of what I describe as 'epistemological millenarianism'; the conception of a methodologically sensible future in which the epistemological field is an actively common heritage of mankind, but without a plausible or credible route to.

The discussion on Blyden is rich and resourceful. But because Mudimbe does not examine Blyden's ideas from a historically analytical perspective, the evolution of Blyden's thought is lost. On a whole range of issues, including Islam, Christianity, African nationalism, native culture and colonialism, Blyden's views were never static. They changed. A fuller appreciation of Blyden cannot be achieved unless it is structured firmly in a historical matrix. The presentation of Ethiopian Sources of Knowledge, as an appendix, tags on rather ungainly to the tail-end of the study. This is unfortunate, given its analytically exciting possibilities. A mind like Mudimbe's would have possibly satisfyingly dissected it to be gorged by African scholarship.

The text has its occasional factual slips. I shall provide two examples. On page 76, we are told about '....the first monographs of African laws and customs', and then referred to Ajisafe and Danquah. Certainly, Sarbah and Casely Hayford pre-date these efforts¹¹. Another such slip is on page 45, where we are wrongly informed that; 'The mass celebrated on the Guinea Coast in 1481, under a big tree displaying the royal arms of Portugal, symbolized the possession of a new territory'. The Portuguese actually, were in;

*La Mina on the 19th January 1482. On the following morning they suspended the banner of Portugal from the bough of a lofty tree, at the foot of which they erected an altar, and the whole company assisted at the first mass that was celebrated in Guinea..*¹²

Concluding Remarks

Mudimbe has produced a masterpiece in scholarship on Africa. The solidity of his learning, his acutely analytical mind, the richness of his discourse, and his courage to address central and daunting issues facing African scholarship

11 See John Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti Customary Laws*. London. 1st Edition. 1897, Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions*. London. 1903.

12 See N.O.Anim's contribution on Ghana in, D.C. Scanlon. (ed), *Church, State, and Education in Africa*. New York. 1966.p.168. Also, R.M. Wiltgen. *Gold Coast Mission History : 1471-1880*. Techny. Illinois. 1956. p.16.

are laudable. There are of course as indicated, weaknesses in the exposition. To my mind the most sensitive, indeed the Achilles heel of his work lies with the choice of the concepts of 'the same' and 'the other'. In his search to find what many will agree is a desirable objective i.e. the basis of a universal epistemological reference point in the study of society and Africa in particular, Mudimbe's ultimate position is vague. As we have earlier stated, the dialectics of this process requires that initially, 'the other' consciously constitutes itself for-itself as an autonomously self-defining source of episteme. It is this step which will create the basis of the negation of the Occidento-centric focus of what today is the epistemological field. It is only when the negation has been effected that the basis of a common universal epistemological heritage can be put in place. As Mpoyi-Bwatu, N'Zembele and Willame have urged Mudimbe, he needs 'to draw the political implications from his conclusions' (Page XI). The cultural dimensions of the 'national question' is lost on him. As I have frequently insisted, the use of African languages constitutes a missing link in any move forward in African intellectual and scholastic progress. Mudimbe (also Hountondji) wants ultimately to become international without being first national, in a historical situation where 'the self' of the African has never since the penetration of the west been allowed to exist or even coexist except as a mimic man. 'The other' is a mimic man.



Reinventing Africa?

Ernest Harsch*

The images of Africa prevalent today in the industrialized countries of the West may be marginally more sophisticated and nuanced than in the days of direct colonial rule, when they were dominated by explicit and openly racist portrayals of Africans as primitive, childish, and illogical, as "peoples without history". But the likenesses of Africa that find their way into the mass media are still predominantly cast in poses of inferiority: the starving child with begging bowl, the venal and corrupt ruler who can so easily manipulate his subjects, interminable civil wars and tribal slaughter, societies in perpetual decay. Pity the poor African, still struggling to master the art of civilization.

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