

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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It is such distorted external conceptions of Africa - along with the efforts of Africans to refashion their own thinking - that most concern Valentin Mudimbe, Zairian scholar and philosopher. In a manner similar to that of the early African nationalist leaders and intellectuals, he looks toward a "reinvention" of Africa, in his case focusing most extensively on the realm of ideas.

Mudimbe's "archaeological perspective" seeks to chip away at centuries of European fancy, speculation, and theorizing about Africa to reveal the underlying core of "ethnocentrism" that marked not only the early European colonial writings and commentaries, but also much subsequent Western scholarship and investigation, based as it has been on the premise that "scientifically there is nothing to be learned from 'them' (Africans) unless it is already 'ours' or comes from 'us'" (p. 15). This approach has resulted in a denial of African accomplishments and capacities:

Since Africans could produce nothing of value, the technique of Yoruba statuary must have come from Egyptians; Benin art must be a Portuguese creation; the architectural achievement of Zimbabwe was due to Arab technicians; and Hausa and Buganda statecraft were inventions of white invaders. (p. 13)

We learn that much of the ideological groundwork for the imposition of European rule was laid by the Christian missions, so closely identified with the cultural propaganda, patriotic motivations, and commercial interests of their colonial benefactors. From the Vatican came "sacred instructions" justifying the conquest and domination of pagan peoples, while the missionaries in the field, often in tandem with colonial administrators, sometimes on their own, set about converting African minds, undercutting the cohesion of traditional pre-colonial societies, and replacing them with new relations and modes of thinking better suited to European rule and exploitation.

Very soon came the anthropologists, whom Mudimbe skewers with particular relish. Reflecting the conventions of social Darwinism that were in vogue during the genesis of their discipline, the anthropologists undertook the task of studying and classifying the continent's varied peoples and cultures, assigning them to their places in the grid of social evolution, and measuring their distances from the attributes of civilization, as defined in Europe. Consciously or not, their work provided further intellectual justification for Europe's "civilizing mission" and - not incidentally - gave the new colonial administrators a clearer and more sophisticated understanding of their subjects. Mudimbe notes with sympathy the more recent efforts of some anthropologists to break with this European-centered approach and to analyze African societies with a measure of respect for their

traditional cultures and values. "But so far it seems impossible to imagine any anthropology without a Western epistemological link". (p. 19)

Despite the demise of direct colonial rule and the attainment of formal political independence, African societies continued to be defined within European (and North American) conceptual frames, which, by and large, implied "that Africans must evolve from their frozen state to the dynamism of Western civilization". (p. 76) Though Mudimbe himself cites few contemporary manifestations of this trend, one example that springs to mind is the drive by the major Western powers, through the IMF and World Bank, to impose market-oriented structural adjustment programs on Africa. Without entering here into a discussion of the appropriateness of these particular policy prescriptions, one aspect is worth underlining: the assumption that Africans themselves are incapable of devising strategies for their own economic development and that the solutions must come from external "experts". This can take on particularly arrogant tones, as evidenced by City Bank Vice-President George "Jack" Clark, who has remarked, "in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, we're dealing with institutions that have now been in their businesses for over 40 years ... Their wisdom is so overwhelming that there just isn't anything else in the league"¹³.

The policies of the IMF and the World Bank would not be adopted so readily, nor would other misconceptions about Africa gain such wide currency, if many Africans themselves did not accept this "wisdom" of the West. Citing critiques by E.W. Blyden, Franz Fanon, and more contemporary African thinkers and political leaders, Mudimbe devotes some space to discussing Africans' internalization of the ideas, concepts, and ways of thinking of their former colonial overlords. On top of Africa's many other burdens and afflictions, from the extreme dependence of its economies to the ease with which external powers can intervene politically and militarily, the non-African imprint on much of the continent's intellectual life emerges as a key impediment to African self-awareness and self-actualization.

But by various meandering pathways, with half-steps and false starts, against numerous physical and political obstacles, Africans are striving to cast off their intellectual straitjackets. In history, sociology, theology, philosophy, and even anthropology itself, they are questioning and challenging earlier conceptions about themselves and about their place in the world. It is this process that most concerns Mudimbe, and forms the heart of his book.

¹³ *Africa News*, vol. 31, No. 12, June 12, 1989, p. 2.

Mudimbe cites and comments upon the works of scores of African writers, historians, social scientists, theologians, and political leaders. If nothing else, his bibliography alone would be a valuable reference source for students of African intellectual discourse. One chapter, devoted almost entirely to E.W. Blyden, provides a fascinating intellectual portrait of that prescient - and often contradictory - champion of African advancement, whom some have termed the father of African nationalism and pan-Africanism (despite his ambivalent affinity for Western "civilizing" endeavors).

Reflecting Mudimbe's penchant for the art of abstract thought, one recurrent question seems to emerge from his inquiry: is there an African philosophy? From the evidence he presents, this has been a subject of considerable debate among African intellectuals. The response appears to be colored, in part, by whether the particular individual seeks to borrow and adapt ideas and methodologies originating from outside the continent, rejects them in favor of an "authentic" African world view or seeks a fusion. It also seems influenced by whether one's approach draws on class analysis or is broadly nationalist. (The two sets of dichotomies are not necessarily parallel, with many crosscurrents of thought intersecting them.)

P.J. Hountondji of Benin, one of Africa's better-known Marxist intellectuals, proposes a definition of African philosophy based on the geographical origin of its authors,

rather than an alleged specificity of content. The effect of this is to broaden the narrow horizon which has hitherto been imposed on African philosophy and to treat it, as now conceived, as a methodical inquiry with the same universal aims as those of any other philosophy in the world. (quoted p. 159)

Others (V. Mulago, Alexis Kagame, N. Tshiamalenga) do seek a philosophy that is somehow specifically African in nature. Mudimbe himself seems to lean toward this camp. In a manner reminiscent of the negritude literary and political current of the 1950s or Cheikh Anta Diop's efforts to counter the colonial myths of African primitiveness by demonstrating the existence of vital pre-colonial African civilizations, these authors tend to look back to traditional African thought as an inspiration for contemporary philosophical inquiry. They are not agreed, however, whether traditional thought itself represented a "deep", implicit philosophy (as Kagame has argued), or simply provides the raw material from which a philosophy or philosophies may be built. Nor do they necessarily idealize the past. Mabika Kalanda, for example, has urged that tradition be purged of those characteristics that predispose Africans to submission.

Ironically, considering the role that Christian missionaries played in Africa's colonization, a number of these intellectuals also function within a

Christian theological framework and have been active in movements to Africanize Christian teachings. Some (including Mudimbe himself) are or have been in the priesthood or teach at theological universities. To the inevitable question about why Africans should believe in a Christianity that was used to advance racial and class exploitation, Mudimbe quotes the Jesuit priest E. Mveng responding that "the West is less and less Christian" and preaches ideas that are "far, very far from the gospel" (p.172). Africans, Mveng implies, can play a role in reviving Christianity, by adapting it more to people's genuine aspirations.

But what has this to do with developing an "authentically" African intellectual life? Why should Christianity offer a more favorable avenue for developing African self-expression than do other strains of thought?

The focus on Christianity is all the more puzzling when one considers that in much of Africa, from the north, through the Sahel, and down the eastern coast, Islam - a religion less directly tainted by European colonialism - either is dominant or holds significant minority allegiance. This could hardly be gleaned from reading Mudimbe's book. Outside of his chapter on Blyden, who demonstrated considerable respect for Islamic organization and discipline, Mudimbe only mentions Islam two or three times. He makes no attempt to discuss Islam's influence on African philosophical thought, nor does he acknowledge the existence of an intellectual discourse within Islamic theology. To cite just one example, the violent uprisings in northern Nigeria in 1980 and 1982 by impoverished followers of the Islamic millenarian prophet Maitatsine, in a region dominated by wealthy Islamic emirs, indicates that profound tensions and conflicting viewpoints traverse Islam as well.

Mudimbe's neglect of Islam is reinforced by his geographically narrow treatment of "Africa" as Africa south of the Sahara, a common (and artificial) division which serves to reduce Islam's relative weight. Yet it cannot be explained by this alone. As already implied, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Mudimbe is motivated by a strong affinity toward Christian theology, a bias that influences not only his assessments of particular African thinkers, but also the very selection of authors and topics he chooses to discuss. This would be quite acceptable if the boundaries and leanings of his approach were declared openly, at the outset. They are not.

The particular thrust of Mudimbe's perspective also becomes evident in his treatment of African marxist thought. Unlike Islam, he does not ignore this current and even acknowledges that it has a profound impact on the continent's intellectual life, serving as a source of inspiration, ideas, and methodology for many African thinkers and political leaders from the days of the anti-colonial struggle through the present. As evidenced by his bibliography and citations, Mudimbe has obviously done some reading

among the works of African marxists and non-African marxists writing on Africa, and has pondered how to answer them.

Mudimbe reproaches marxists for positing a universalist theory that seeks to subsume regional and local variables into a general and rigid explanation of social evolution. marxist analysis, he says, reworks history into "a perfectly evolutionist and functional grid as an almost mechanical succession of modes of production determined by productive forces and class struggle". (p. 196) Mudimbe's criticism is not entirely without foundation, considering the tendency among some writers, in line with dogmatic schemas associated with Stalinism, to force Africa into analogies based on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe. But that is far from the totality of marxist discourse from and about Africa, and there has been a rich debate within the marxist tradition on the complexities of African social formation, including a questioning of the idea that the continent must inevitably pass through the same stages of economic and social development that more industrialized regions have traversed. Nor can this debate be reduced to an application to Africa of the famous "Asiatic mode of production" construct, as Mudimbe seems to imply in his sole passage devoted to this discussion.

This presentation of marxism as a rigid, *externally derived* approach that is insensitive to African specificity is central to Mudimbe's argument. For he implies that it should be rejected by African intellectuals from a nationalist impulse, as being little different than the ethnocentric European conceptions of primitiveness vs. civilization. Elsewhere, Mudimbe has been more explicit, accusing African intellectuals such as Hountondji, Majhemout Diop, and Amady Ali Dieng of being "seduced by the metaphors of an egalitarian society". Their "conversion", he argues in a preface to another book, has signified "a remarkable reconquest by Western historicity. The colonial period had installed it for Capital. Today it is being installed - in the name of the universality of Marx, and at last openly, after 30 years of rhetorical hypocrisy - as the exigency of marxist and socialist laws. What a symbol!"¹⁴.

Mudimbe's association of marxism with oppressive colonially inspired ideologies is hardly original. The call to "authenticity" has been raised many times before, not only by well-meaning African nationalists striving to find a voice suitable to popular aspirations, but also by reactionary despots (Mobutu, Eyadéma) seeking to stifle critical thought and cloak their oppressive rule in the garb of "tradition".

14 "Preface" to Bogumil Jewsiewicki, *Marx, Afrique et Occident: les pratiques africanistes de l'histoire marxiste*, Montreal: McGill University, Centre for Developing-Area Studies, Monograph Series, No. 19, 1985, pp. iii, xi.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that Mudimbe himself is not consistent about rejecting ideas and philosophies originating from Europe. He presents the works of such (non-marxist) intellectuals as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Michel Foucault in a very positive light, and explicitly bases part of his methodology on the latter.

In reading Mudimbe's book, one soon becomes aware that he is very much wedded to the concept of the Idea, in its purer forms. This may account for his antipathy to Marxism; which sees its ultimate test in how well it reflects and explains the world of concrete social relations and helps the oppressed to act upon it. For Mudimbe, that is not philosophy's proper vocation. This comes through in his appellation of Hountondji's proposal that philosophy engage in a dialogue with social reality as a "paradoxical task" (p. 168). It is also evident in his attack on black theology in South Africa as being "applied theology", that is, championing the cause of radical political organizations; by way of paraphrasing Eboussi-Boulaga, he charges Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Manas Buthelezi, and other activist theologians of submitting to "the service of new political chauvinisms and idols, repeating the missionary's dream of conciliating God's glory and Caesar's power" (p. 63). That Mudimbe can see little difference between pro-colonial missionaries and black theologians seeking to bring down the colonial-type apartheid regime speaks volumes.

There are other peculiar formulations as well. Mudimbe argues that it was Sartre's *Black Orpheus* that was in large measure responsible for the blossoming of the negritude literary movement in Francophone Africa and that black intellectuals "read Sartre, discussed his anticolonialist positions and, generally speaking, upheld them". (p. 85) Without belittling Sartre's undoubted influence on a layer of African anticolonial intellectuals, a question needs to be posed: Were these intellectuals (and indeed, Sartre himself) not also influenced, at least to some extent, by the very visible anticolonial struggles that were then underway? Did not the strikes by African rail and dockworkers, the women's mobilizations in Nigeria, or rural insurgencies such as Kenya's Mau Mau leave some imprint on African intellectuals' efforts to throw off colonial ideological assumptions and develop new, more independent ways of thinking?

By overlooking this essential interplay, Mudimbe's presentation of the African philosophical debate cuts out the very real social input that gives these discussions their vitality and relevance. If the project of developing a genuine African intellectual tradition is to make further headway, then it needs to continually seek nourishment from outside the relatively narrow and stultified confines of academia.

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