

MUDIMBE ON THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE OF AFRICAN CULTURE: A REVIEW OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER.

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Introduction

Who is the African? The one described by history books or the one born within an African culture? It is common place to observe that history books on our library shelves are authored not by Africans, but by Western writers. Can their account be trusted? At the wake of colonialism, Europe, inspired by the culture of documentation, went ahead to study African cultures. Many Westerners that stepped foot on African soil engaged in the study of the behaviour, religion and tradition of the Blacks who they subjugated and took as slaves. They employed anthropological and historical methods in documentation of their findings. The challenge for the twentieth century African is to ascertain the accuracy of what has been presented as the African experience. How much of our experience as Africans is really documented in these history books? It is no news that these history books have formed part of our school curriculum in social studies and history. Have we over the years been telling ourselves and generations who their ancestors were or “what” the West say they were?

In this essay, we shall try to address these questions raised above as presented in the first three chapters of V. Y. Mudimbe’s work *The Invention of Africa Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. The book explores the anthropological and archaeological dimension of African gnosis. What has been, and can be known of Africa and the various questions it has provoked. We shall commence by exploring the colonist agenda in engaging in this enterprise that has today turned Africa into a dependent and unproductive continent. Then we shall take a cursory look at the flaws of the method applied in studying Africa and arriving at a believed and propagated African Experience. What is the position of African thinkers of the twentieth century on this issue? This shall be our concern in the third part, after which we shall briefly present the critiques against Mudimbe’s positions.

The Colonist and the Colonized

The Westerners, by the use of propaganda, have always made the world believe that the invasion of Africa which began in the 1400 was timely in that it achieved its aim of inventing or discovering this shrouded continent. Colonization, they say, brought a group of people without a society to become one, and also brought them to the light of civilization. But is this true? Far from it! The colonialists were capitalists, with the sole aim of acquiring, procuring and exploiting lands in colonies; domesticating natives and implementing new methods of production. Thus their program can be seen as targeted at “*domination of physical space, reformation of “natives” minds and integration of local economic histories into the Western perspectives.*”¹

The genesis of all of this is the Western conception of possessing a superior civilization and so a higher identity in the order of human species. This consciousness gives them the impetus to invade, oppress, use and subjugate their fellow men by all possible means. According to Mudimbe,

*“Because of the colonializing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies [Inferior versus Superior].”*²

The European sees himself/herself as the Same, and other human species as the Other. The ideal and universal is encompassed in the Westerner, while the others are partakers in this universality.³ With the influence of Social Darwinianism, an order had been created among the human species. Those at the bottom of the ladder were earlier comers, primitive and uncivilized, and in dear need of evolution which was to be wrought by the already evolved.⁴ By the use of guns and the Bible, the West overrun Africa and imposed her worldview on a civilization that cannot be considered as taking off, but as different from that found in the West. The Other was marginalized as her culture, beliefs and tradition was considered barbaric and ferocious, while her people termed savages, untutored, unintelligent and

¹ Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 2

² Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 4

³ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 46

⁴ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 17

irrational. There was thus a chasm between the Same and the Other which can be considered as the major cause of underdevelopment and “stagnancy”. Mudimbe, paraphrasing Bairoch and Bigo, says that this intermediary space

*“also unveils the empirical evidence of this tension by showing concrete examples of developmental failures such as demographic imbalance, extraordinarily high birth rates, progressive disintegration of the classic family structure, illiteracy, severe social and economic disparities, dictatorial regimes functioning under the cathartic name of democracy, the breakdown of religious traditions, the constitution of syncretic churches, etc.”*⁵

Mudimbe identifies two types of ethnocentrism⁶ playing out in this suppressive program of the West. One is based on the belief that nothing good can come from them (the Other), and even whatever it seems they know is only a participation of the universal which is Western. Thus the birth of epistemological ethnocentrism.⁷ This view has not disappeared from the European’s worldview today, because they believe that Africa has nothing intellectual to contribute to the international community. The other is what Mudimbe calls cultural ethnocentrism, connected to the intellectual and behavioural attitudes. The Same is the ideal man or woman, because the ideal way of thinking and behaving is as viewed from the lenses of the Western consciousness, cultural and social principles. Thus the African “is” because the Westerner “is” and ought to be what the Westerner deems fit for him. He is to be subjugated, downtrodden and used because the Other is a savage beast. In fact John Lok the great-great grandfather of the philosopher John Locke described

"Negroes, [as] a people of beastly living, without a God, law, religion"; "other people whose women are common.... whose inhabitants dwell in caves and dens: for these are

⁵ Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 5

⁶ **Ethnocentrism** is judging another culture solely by the values and standards of one's own culture. Ethnocentric individuals judge other groups relative to their own ethnic group or culture, especially with concern for language, behavior, customs, and religion. These ethnic distinctions and subdivisions serve to define each ethnicity's unique cultural identity

⁷ The belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from the Other unless it is already ours or comes from us.

*their houses, and the flesh of serpents their meat"; "and people without heads, having their eyes and mouths in their breast."*⁸

Voyage Documents

With this mindset, the field of anthropology was founded to discover the Other. In this quest, we had the colonist whose task was to capture virgin lands, explore and exploit the resources and transport them to the imperial state; the anthropologist, commissioned to discover the people; and the missionary to Christianize them. In fact, contrary to excuses given on religious grounds, the missionary's objective had to be, and was, co-extensive with his country's political and cultural perspectives of colonization. According to A. J. Christopher:

*"missionaries, possibly more than members of other branches of the colonial establishment, aimed at the radical transformation of indigenous society . . . They therefore sought, whether consciously or unconsciously, the destruction of pre-colonial societies and their replacement by new Christian societies in the image of Europe."*⁹

The worst of reports is that from the colonists who wrote in a pungent fashion in order to continue the task of exploitation, always writing to the government of the nitwit disposition of the natives. The anthropologists applied scientific method in their studies. Like the missionary, who contributed immensely to the subjugation of the natives by pacifying them with religion, the anthropologist lived with the natives in order to understand them especially by learning their language. As it is believed, language is a store of the people's culture and philosophy, the anthropologists did a great disservice to Africa, as their "will to truth" is put to the test. According to R. Wagner, "*we might actually say that the anthropologists invent the culture he believes himself to be studying, that the relation is more real for being his particular act and experiences than the things it relates.*"¹⁰ For me, the flaws of the anthropologists are not a conscious attempt to misrepresent the African, but with such ethnocentric worldview, it will be by share miracle for a European to present the African experience correctly. According to M. Hollis

⁸ Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 71

⁹ Christopher, A. J. *Colonial Africa* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1984), p. 83.

¹⁰ Wagner, R. *The Invention of Culture*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 27

*“anthropologists and missionaries knew nothing about the “natives” when they started and seem to have discovered everything they [the natives] know in the end. This is very well; how do they discover that the natives sometimes perceive what they perceive? Insofar as the anthropologist is concerned.... “two possible answers are that he observes their behaviour and that he translates their utterances.”*¹¹

It is quite disturbing to know that they proudly present the African experience using these parameters, forgetting that understanding the translation of the words in a language is not tantamount to understanding the meaning of sentences, idioms, phrases, parables and folks within which African experiences are integrated. Like Wittgenstein, understanding the meaning of a language entails entering into the language-game, not merely understanding the meaning of each word in a sentence.¹² Mudimbe criticizes this method of recording history. It is viewing a worldview from the lenses of another worldview. The anthropologist and missionaries are aware, but deny the uniqueness of every human culture, and proper presentation of a people’s experience requires being part of that experience, which for the European is already impossible because of the Same and Other dichotomy. For Oruka, *“African philosophy [African worldview] is viewed as totally obscure from its Western counterpart, this contrast being said to lie in the dissimilarity between the mindset of the two distinct peoples.”*¹³ Unlike Western epistemology which is scientific, rational, critical and detached from the community, that of Africans stand in direct contrast to this in that it is community based. Therefore, recording a history of any African society requires embedding one’s self into the community which can be achieved only by been born (being a native) in the community, necessitating a worldview which is uniquely African. Again, Mudimbe attributes this failure to the position which anthropology placed the African upon study. The African was considered the object, while the anthropologist was the subject. This denigrating classification coloured the findings of the Western historian, because it is only in placing the object of knowledge (this time a human being) as a subject that the enquirer can gain access to the consciousness of the African, and then present a fair picture of his

¹¹ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 67

¹² Cf. Wittgenstein Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Tranl. By G. E. M. Anscombe. (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing) 2009.No. 21-26

¹³ Deacon Moya, *Trends in African Philosophy*, In *African Philosophy Reader*, edited by P. H. Coetzee (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 116

experience.¹⁴ Flowing from the subject-object method of enquiry, “*the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, discourses were generally characterized by a functional perspective and a self-righteous intolerance founded on the philosophical implications of the paradigms of conflict and significance*”¹⁵ which accounts for the normality, creative dynamism, and achievements of the “civilized world” against the abnormality, deviance, and primitiveness of non - literate societies. Functionality rather than entity or identity guided the Europeans’ search for the African.

The Way Forward.

Up until the 1920, the epistemological and socio-political status of the African was what the Western colonialists said it was. It bore a scar deliberately marked by the Europeans in order for the beauty of the Western worldview to be clearly seen and appreciated. One can observe three complementary genres of "speeches" contributing to the invention of a primitive Africa: the exotic text on savages represented by travellers’ reports; the philosophical interpretations about a hierarchy of civilizations; and the anthropological search for primitiveness. The complementarity of these speeches is obvious. It is perceived as a unity in the Western consciousness.¹⁶

Many scholars of Western origin have been sympathetic to the African marginalization and subjugation that they tried to re-write the African genesis. Giovanni Francesco Romano, Samuel Ajayi Crowther (Nigerian born), and Placide Frans Tempels, whom Mudimbe used as models of people who saw themselves as saviour of the African continent, are still considered as possessing a common consciousness, that of a reductionist. The particulars (Other) must be reduced to the universal (Same). Eboussi Boulaga was apt in presenting the Christian missionary reductionist scheme:

“The missionary language of derision is basically a cultural position, the expression of an ethnocentric outlook. The aspects of refutation and demonstration rationalize the initial ethnocentric moment and are aimed explicitly towards an intellectual reduction that would complement the rules of orthodoxy and conformity. Thus we have three moments, rather than types, of violence in missionary language. Theoretically, they are

¹⁴ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 25

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.27

¹⁶ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 69

expressed in the concepts of derision, refutation -demonstration, and orthodoxy - conformity.”¹⁷

In the 1930s, the Negritude pressure group emerged as a revolt movement aimed at reclaiming the African identity from the mess which the Westerners had made of it.¹⁸ Applying their writing skills, men like Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Leon Damas, laboriously fought to reorientate the African mind that has already been bastardized by ideology of Same and Other; the Superior and Inferior; the Master and Slave. The African must first re-discover himself apart from what history books written by Western anthropologists say about him. He must see his unique self, culture and mindset. This is what the Negritude movement set out to do.

Mudimbe presents Senghor’s view on the way out of this “troubled waters”. The path to liberation which Senghor terms African Socialism is a stage in the complex process beginning with the Negritude movement and oriented towards complete liberation or universal civilization.¹⁹ He highlights three major moments in this struggle.

1. The African by the very process of colonization was depersonalized, made inferior and so lost his identity. The identity known to the African was that given him by his superior, the Westerner. This sentiment of belonging no longer to oneself but to another goes together with an awareness of inferiority, which becomes translated in social terms into a caste and class consciousness. Negritude is the warmth of being, living, and participating in a natural, social, and spiritual harmony. A move to reclaim himself first, and then define his relation with others. It is laden with both ideological and political agendas
2. Marxism as practiced by the colonialist was one that alienated the African from his labour. He was a slave who deserved to be treated like the beast of the field, so that while he worked, his master fed from the sweat of his brow. But Senghor is proposing another kind of Marxism here. One “*acceptable insofar as they indicate a recognition of the natural rights of humans, who are and must be free agents and creators of culture*”. However, Senghor does not fail to acknowledge the shortcomings of Marxism.

¹⁷ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 52

¹⁸ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 83

¹⁹ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 93-94

3. Evolution of the human person to higher level of consciousness is obedience to the natural law. This Senghor says will “imply at least three major theses: the principle of development of all human beings, the principle of harmony in development, and God's existence as a natural necessity. Senghor thinks that some basic African values are well expressed in this perspective: namely the idea of community, the principle of harmony between evolving humans and changing nature, and, finally, the vision of a unitary universe.

Mudimbe, agrees with Levi-Strauss, Tempels and Foucault on the method of structuralism as the sure way to liberation of the African mind and society. Classical Structuralism as Levi Strauss calls it, is the idea that communication systems are closed, discrete systems that can be studied in isolation from both socio-historical context and the consciousness of actors. Each communication system and type thereof, moreover, possesses an underlying synchronic structure that governs spatio-temporal practices and contents even though it is unknown to the actors involved. Lévi-Strauss further retained the idea that differences and relations, especially binary oppositions, play a crucial role in defining structural elements.²⁰ The components of each culture, such as music, cooking practices, ideologies, myths and religion, have relations with one another in an orderly manner, governed by a logical framework. This relation as found in this society is also found in other societies because there is a homology in the underlying structure of both societies.

Criticisms Against Mudimbe's Position

Archie is of the opinion that Mudimbe, though writing to correct the harm done by Europe's colonization of Africa, is not free from the Eurocentric experience. First, Mudimbe's reference to discussions on colonialism and its inconsistency with economic development emphasizes his point of Africa not having an economic system.²¹ Second, to what could Mudimbe point, as may well account for the stagnancy of Africa if not colonization when he says “*that if colonialism was inconsistent with economic development, it was at least, since its inception, quite consistent*

²⁰ Theodore Schartzki, “Structuralism”, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Version 1.0, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 8352.

²¹ Marlene Archie, *An Afrocentric Critique OF Mudimbe's Book, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. (Temple University), p. 3

with its own economic interests and objectives."²² I am of the opinion that Pre-colonial African society had been flourishing and was gradually arriving at its own civilization when it experienced the still-birth from the hands of Europe. No two civilizations can look alike, due to the uniqueness of the people and the epoch. Thus, I agree with Archie in calling Mudimbe "an African, sympathetic to the West." Again, Mudimbe enumerates the academic achievements of those who renown African scholars who are bringing in a new and correct gnosis to the "African genesis." Although this is a good starting point for any research in terms of being intellectually sound and committed, yet he states that their knowledge and method is based on European constructs.²³ So we are not still free from the strong arm of the West. Is it the case that we are falling back to what the sympathetic Western anthropologists and historians did? Is it not possible to get it right?

Since the idea of Negritude is endorsed by ethno-philosophy, it has come under attack by many African philosophers. For Frantz Fanon, if by negritude, we get transformed, then, the African has lost rather than discovered himself. He says: "*The transformation of one's present condition signifies at the same time the transformation of one's essence, of what is particular to the self, of what is original and unique about it ...it is to enter into a negative relationship with the self.*"²⁴ Hountondji's view is that Negritude will not bring us to conquer the world, but conquer ourselves, and this is not wisdom. Philosophy should be a reflection on science considered as a significant component of modern culture and equated the philosophical enterprise with the development of science. Thus, Hountondji seems to endorse a pragmatic outlook to African philosophy.²⁵

Conclusion

Mudimbe, in this great work, shows how the West created a dichotomy between themselves and the African by subjugating and oppressing the Other in order to assert the Same. This was partly accomplished by the documentation of who the African is. They succeeded in telling us "what the African is", and not "who the African is." This is as a result of the functional approach to the

²² Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 3

²³ Cf. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 41-42.

²⁴ Coetzee P. H, *African Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998.) p. 138

²⁵ Cf. Coetzee P. H, *African Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998.) p. 139

anthropological study of the African experience. An approach that does not see the African experience and mindset as unique, peculiar and particular to them, just as those of the West are. The work is true to its topic "*Invention of Africa*." With the rise of the Negritude movement, Africans took to reclaiming themselves, by rewriting the knowledge claims of the West. Yet due to the incursion of Western ideas into the consciousness of the African mind, it seems the African has been successfully made a partaker in the experience of the Same, such that his uniqueness is diluted, in the event that retracing his historical past and thus his identity becomes a herculean task.

For me, Mudimbe does not seem to present a utopian method of solving the problem, rather, he says we can move on, rather than try to reconstruct the past. It is his [the African] right to exploit any part of this heritage. What this means is that: the Western tradition of science, as well as the trauma of slave trade and colonization, is part of Africa's present-day heritage. When we Africans look inward, we may succeed in finding "the African."

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