

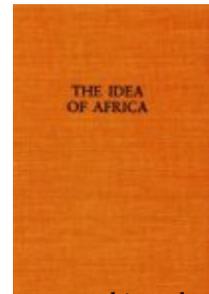
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



V.Y. Mudimbe. *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. xvii + 234 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33898-3.

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In *The Idea of Africa* the African philosopher and cultural anthropologist V. Y. Mudimbe has produced a work that is as ambitious in concept as it is impenetrable in style. From the outset it is obvious that this exceedingly dense book is not for the general reader. With chapters ranging from “Symbols and the Interpretation of the African Past” and “Which Idea of Africa?” to “The Power of the Greek Paradigm,” “Domestication and the Conflict of Memories,” and “Reprendre,” the scope is sweeping indeed. One cannot but hope that Mudimbe will make good on his own statement of purpose:

In this [book] I explore the concept of Africa by bringing together all the levels of interpretation, and I examine their roots in and reference to the Western tradition, focusing on some of their past and present constellations and involving myself as reader (p. xv).

Certainly there is no false humility here. For anyone who has read through Mudimbe’s well-received but difficult book, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), the implied promise that this book’s five essays and postscript “are stories written for my ‘Americanized’ children, born in Africa” (p. xii), would seem to come as welcome news. One is pleased to read, for example, that *The Idea of Africa* is:

both the product and the continuation of *The Invention of Africa* insofar as it asserts that there are natural features, cultural characteristics, and, probably, values that contribute to the reality of Africa as a continent and its civilizations as constituting a totality different from those of, say, Asia and Europe” (p. xv).

With its explicit (if time-honored) thesis that Africa is represented in Western scholarship by false constructs and fantasies made up deliberately by scholars and writ-

ers since Greek times, all of this adds up to one big order. A scholar steeped in philosophy and the history of ideas, Mudimbe would seem ideally suited to this prodigious task. For this reviewer, however, astonishment gave way to bewilderment. A work that promises significant enlightenment soon became bogged down in confusion. A writer capable of the following passage, in the Preface,

It might be useful to note that *The Idea of Africa*, like *The Invention of Africa*, is not about the history of Africa’s landscapes or her civilizations. Since the 1920s, African scholars, and most notably anthropologists and historians, have been interrogating these landscapes and civilizations and reconstructing, in a new fashion, piece by piece, fragile genealogies that bear witness to historical vitalities, that until then, seemed invisible to students of African affairs (p. xii).

can pen the following one page later:

If one accepts Pierre Bourdieu’s grids of classification: on the one hand, phenomenology as a critical and autocritical reading beginning within a determined subject and rigorously apprehending the perceived and rendering it as both discourse and knowledge; and on the other hand, the dangerous ethnophilosophical enterprise, so well illustrated in African Studies by Placid Tempels and his disciples. Negating its subjective foundation, ethnophilosophy claimed to be a perfect “scientific” translation of a ‘philosophical’ implicit system which is out there in the quotidian experience, and it qualified itself as an objectivist discourse . . . (p. xiii).

The author’s promise that this is a work designed not to analyze African achievements (something done rather thoroughly by many scholars), but rather to bolster “a very simple hypothesis”—namely that in all cultures one

finds “a sort of zero degree discourse” made up essentially of “popular, primary founding events of the culture and its historical becoming” (p. xiii), almost immediately gives way to obscurantist gobbledygook. Jargon, particularly the specialized language of philosophy (see the segments subtitled “Questions of Method, Questions of Philosophy,” “Philosophy and the Practice of Ethnography,” and “The African Practice of Philosophy,” pp. 202–208) may have its place when scholars within a discipline speak exclusively to each other.

One may safely assume, for example, that unquoted references to Kant are a propos for philosophers. On the other hand, obscure language is often the refuge of pedantry, covering up for a lack of clarity in both conception and execution. In this book the endless recourse to structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist terminology almost guarantees obscurity. Readers not versed in philosophical or epistemological discourse and Foucaultian dialogue may feel like a miner looking for veins of gold amidst jumbles of rock; only the most strenuous and consistent effort will reveal some ore. There is no denying that Mudimbe can be illuminating in his investigation of the Western (white) world’s penchant for rationalizing every exploitation in self-righteous ideological conceits, but there are others who have done the job with both clarity and accessibility, including Edward Said, Abdul JanMohammed, and Jonah Raskin, not to mention George Padmore.

The recourse to jargon is not the only problem with this tantalizing book. While the overall scheme of *The Idea of Africa*, as explicated in the Preface, appears consistent, the five chapters, even taken as a whole, have little unity when looked at closely. The medley of essays—despite some penetrating insights—is daunting, and one cannot but wonder who will read past the first twenty-five pages of mostly impenetrable language. For those who do there is a reward through glimpses and tidbits of Mudimbe’s comprehension of the philosophical/psychic/historical tendency of a dominant culture to look down upon the “other” as an inferior. This, however, hardly constitutes a breakthrough, and the lack of clarity in the book’s organization becomes self-evident. This book, to put it simply, would certainly be a mistake to assign to undergraduates.

For example, in the second chapter the author leaps from an Africa envisioned by anthropologists, including Melville Herskovits, to an analysis in chapter 3 of such classical Greek writers as Herodotus, Strabo, and Pliny, with a tacked-on segment about Bernal’s *Black Athena*.

Even among more specialized scholars, the book’s relentless pedantry might prove too much. Well before one has finished, one wonders, is the crushing diminuendo of this book, its progressive leaden weight and exceeding reductionism, worth the effort?

For this reviewer the answer is a qualified yes. If the reader is interested at all in a “polysemic” idea of Africa, if s/he is “convinced that its [Africa’s] interpretations do not coincide with the complexity of the rules for its formation” (p. 211), and if s/he is in agreement that the real Africa needs to be “filtered out” from the immense and complex literature about Africa produced in the West, the intellectual rewards are considerable. Even then it is a fair guess that this book will be both disturbing and mystifying for all but a few, regardless of their discipline or interest.

Historians, for example, will surely be puzzled to learn that their discipline is relegated in Mudimbe’s scheme to a “second level discourse” (p. xiv) along with most of the other academic disciplines (sociology, economics, etc.) and that a “construct claiming to hold in a regulated frame the essentials of a past and its characteristics” (p. xiii) is best illustrated by the romantic concept of *Volkgeist*. Does this mean the author considers what happened in the past (as documented by a preponderance of evidence) to be mere discourse? Or is he simply restating the common truism that each generation revises the past according to its own lights? Mudimbe’s grasp of historiography seems uncertain. Since he claims for himself a “meta-discourse” that will produce a history of histories, or at least “a history of histories of African anthropology and history” (p. xiv), one might be forgiven high expectations in reference to those disciplines. One cannot help but wonder whether Mudimbe, will, like Croce, or Vito, deliver something truly meaningful?

I confess to having had some disquiet when asked to review this work. Because it touches on so many disciplines and is so ambitious in scope, few indeed would seem qualified to produce a review that adequately covers history, art history (particularly that of classical Greece), ethnography, philosophy, and literary criticism, all of which Mudimbe rather audaciously orbits like a spy satellite, looking beyond the simple geography of mountains and oceans, seeking what is secret and hidden. One is dazzled by the range of his reading and the sweep of his deconstructive lens.

Philosophers interested in the epistemology of knowledge (especially relating the Western mental constructs of Africa) may find far more here than meets the

eye. One inevitably wonders if the book might better have been targeted to that audience. One also wonders if it is directed, at least in part, to ethnographers, or to curators and other experts on African art. Or to students of African literature. Segments in the latter chapters (reviewed below) would seem to indicate that Mudimbe had these audiences in mind.

This is, however, explicitly not the case. Mudimbe himself repeatedly stakes out territory that is inclusive of history, as well as the other disciplines (anthropology, sociology, literature, and the arts) that have traditionally “covered” Africa. The entire book, therefore, is fair game for any scholar in any of those fields who has some interdisciplinary cognizance. In this reviewer’s opinion much of this book is best summarized as a tendentious melange of highly personal investigations and asides.

For example, what is one to make of the statement—in chapter 1—that Africa’s discovery (in the fifteenth century, so Mudimbe says) “meant and still means the primary violence signified by the word. The slave trade narrated itself accordingly, and the same movement of reduction progressively guaranteed the gradual invasion of the continent” (p. 17)? Does he dismiss the long record of trade diasporas and cross-cultural commerce (including an extensive trade in slaves) from Africa to the Middle East or North Africa, or South Asia, that predated the Atlantic trade? Apparently the author agrees with Ali Mazrui (whom he praises in his references to *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*) that the only slave trade of import was that of the Atlantic, and that the consequences in violence, in this sense, stemmed exclusively from Europe. Though he avoids blatant Afrocentric myths, this emphasis comes perilously close to reductionism.

In another interesting passage Mudimbe refers to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* as a “little known text” (p. 18), a statement that will surely surprise anyone who has taught the content of this work in African History courses during the past thirty years or so. Since the *Periplus* has been mentioned or quoted in scores of anthologies and histories ranging from Basil Davidson on the Left (*The African Past*) to Gann and Duignan on the Right (*Africa and the World*), it would be a rare student indeed, even on the introductory level, who had never heard of this text.

Even more problematic is Mudimbe’s version of the first serious “revision of traditional history,” which he attributes to Alain Bourgeois, a French scholar who lived for a time in Senegal, and, who, according to Mudimbe,

was the first to challenge the fashionable attitude that Negroes were looked down upon from Classical times to the present, and he states somewhat further on that “the African right to dignity...(by) reactivating ancient texts and by interrogating the objective of history...can be dated. The reality of African history, particularly for the sub-Saharan part of the continent, does not seem to exist, at least academically, before the 1940s” (p. 21).

Some historians of Africa might agree with this assertion, but its implications are that the reader discovers almost nothing of the pioneering work of Carter Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and other African American scholars whose efforts, albeit neglected by the mainstream culture of the time, antedated Mudimbe’s revelations (a la Bourgeois) by decades. Though Mudimbe later surprises us with a single notation on George Washington Williams, W.E.B. Du Bois, John Hope Franklin, and others “who argued only that Blacks had a share in building the Egyptian civilization along with other races,” this apparent afterthought seems a mere quibble when compared with his heavily Francophone projections, revealing how Leopold Senghor, influenced (apparently) by Bourgeois, provided an early “reevaluation” of African history.

No one can doubt the poet’s contribution, but surely this is an exaggeration. Furthermore, if it is true, as Mudimbe states, that Eugene Guernier was among the first (1952) to articulate “the African origin of humanity and human consciousness” (p. 23), surely it is disingenuous to dismiss the work of Woodson, Du Bois, and others—done many decades earlier—whose collective efforts provided a real challenge at a time when pseudo-scientific racism was in the ascendency. It is no accident that in the United States African American scholars turn to these early pioneers for inspiration.

What’s more, in a “third group” of scholars whom Mudimbe lists as going a step beyond, to give “an essential importance to the African initiative,” we find Cheikh Anta Diop, Ben-Jochannan, Chancellor Williams, and Martin Bernal. Anyone who has read Ben-Jochannan and Williams must wonder at this phrase, since both make essentially diffusionist, indeed race-centered arguments for the origins of African civilizations, if not all civilizations. Are we expected to accept the implication that Bernal has no difference with these authors as to the “racial” nature of Ancient Egyptians?

Having read the latter’s works with care, as obviously Mudimbe has done, I am clear that Bernal is arguing essentially in favor of the influence of Ancient Egypt

on Classical Greek civilization. Whatever one makes of Bernal's much-challenged argument, surely it is a stretch to assume that he makes the same diffusionist arguments as Diop and his followers. One wonders if Mudimbe has thoroughly studied these highly mythologized texts, which (though widely quoted and often misrepresented in popular tracts) have very little in common with Bernal.

The segment on cultural relativism, which amounts to a fairly sympathetic critique of Herskovitsian assumptions (pp. 46-50), is another case of unrequited possibility. Especially when juxtaposed against structuralism (pp. 50-52), this promises a potentially rewarding search for a larger truth within the grand ethnographic tradition. Yet, it ultimately disappoints, for this segment, like so many throughout the book, seems oddly incomplete. Amidst its constant asides and references, its endless abstractions, one searches in vain for a clear line of development. It is almost as if Mudimbe's disdain for historicity precludes any historical continuity. Where, for example, are the contributions of Boas? And why is there no mention of the diachronic tradition within anthropology that challenges—from within—the natural tendency to seek neat formulas and frozen or immobile societies?

The book improves greatly toward the end, and especially in chapters 5 (Reprendre) and 6 (Coda), Mudimbe further illustrates and condemns the projection onto Africa of Western constructs that rose out of colonialism and imperialism—as in his previous work, *The Invention of Africa*, which was expressly written to expose the categories and conceptual systems that, in Mudimbe's words "depend on a Western epistemological order" (p. xv). His analysis of African art—so long categorized within the "vague domain of primitive art" (p. 154)—within a new system that he calls "architectonic" (p. 155) is provocative and worth study. In seeking commonalities in order to reconcile "the amazingly diverse, complex, and conflicting regional styles," Mudimbe suggests we consider African artworks "as we do literary texts"—that is, as linguistic phenomena, as well as "discursive" circuits (p. 156).

The ensuing segments, particularly those subtitled "Between Two Traditions" and "Regrouping" (pp. 159-164) are certainly original. Some of the passages are eloquent:

New generations have learned from the successes and failures of those [earlier] workshop-cum-laboratories, at the same time they have interrogated their own traditional arts. The artists of the present generation are the children of two traditions, two worlds, both of which

they challenge, merging mechanics and masks, machines and the memories of gods (p. 164).

Those looking for a handle to better comprehend (and teach) the interconnectedness of African arts and literature would do well to read this chapter. Mudimbe's theme is hardly new, of course. Other scholars, including the poet and curator Jean Laude, the art historian Rene Bravmann, the anthropologist Denise Paulme, and of course, Jan Vansina, had long since postulated a high degree of interaction and shared influences, particularly within larger cultural regions, not to mention a historic pedigree. Though he seems unaware of much of this (failing to cite Laude or Paulme), Mudimbe credits Vansina, Price, and others for their contributions, and his synthesis is forward-looking. At one point he takes on Ulli Beier, challenging his lament that "all over Africa the carvers down their tools. The rituals that inspired the artists are dying out. The kings who were patrons have lost their power," with this repost: "So what? This discontinuity, despite its violence, does not necessarily mean the end of African art; it seems, rather, that the ancient models are being richly adapted." Mudimbe cites Beier himself to show how rich the new adaptations are, indeed that many new works reflect "a drive to say...something new, to transcend the crisis of tribal societies and art disorganized by the impact of European culture" (pp. 163-164). In the segment beginning with the title "Popular Art" (pp. 164-174), Mudimbe finds a liberating intensity.

One might quibble at Mudimbe's uncritical use of the term African for Roman writers who came from the Roman (North African) province of that name. One might question Mudimbe's reliance on Foucaultian hypotheses with their characteristic assumptions of a conspiratorial rationality controlling and conditioning virtually all discourse, existing side-by-side with inchoate systems of exclusion. Despite long and additive passages of pretentious jargon so common to this highly abstract and presumptuous deconstructionism, chapter 5 is a confident manifesto integrating art and literature (especially interesting is the critique, mostly favorable, of Christopher Miller's *Theories of Africans*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) into a more optimistic synthesis than one might expect from a scholar steeped in a dialectic that seems to require a decoding, if not a deconstruction, of a mostly terrible past.

At least for those willing to struggle for its gems, this tedious work brings together an eclectic range of sources viewed from a unique interdisciplinary perspective.

tive. However unwieldy, it is a notable contribution.

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