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IN MEMORIAM

Mudimbe's Library

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Abstract

This article reconsiders V.Y. Mudimbe's contribution to "decolonial" impulses that are central to current preoccupations in fields such as postcolonial studies. It argues that key concepts developed by Mudimbe, such as the "colonial library," have been overlooked in these discussions. Further, the article provides insight into important aspects of Mudimbe's thought on the colonial library by reminding readers of the genealogy he excavates in describing the contours of the colonial library and its continued influence (likened by Mudimbe to a lingering odor) that is still to be dismantled.

Résumé

Cet article examine la contribution de V. Y. Mudimbe [*sic : should be Mudimbe, without an accent]* aux dynamiques « décoloniales », qui occupent une place centrale dans les préoccupations contemporaines, notamment dans les études postcoloniales. Il affirme que des notions fondamentales élaborées par Mudimbe, telles que la « bibliothèque coloniale », ont été omises dans ces débats. De surcroît, l'article offre une analyse des éléments significatifs de la réflexion de Mudimbe sur la bibliothèque coloniale, en rappelant aux lecteurs la généalogie qu'il examine à travers la description des contours de cette bibliothèque et de son influence persistante (que Mudimbe assimile à une odeur tenace) à déconstruire.

Resumo

Neste artigo procede-se a uma reavaliação do contributo de V. Y. Mudimbe para os impulsos "descoloniais", os quais são fundamentais para as questões atualmente debatidas em campos diversos, nomeadamente nos estudos pós-coloniais. Argumenta-se aqui que alguns dos conceitos-chave desenvolvidos por Mudimbe, como o de "biblioteca colonial", têm sido negligenciados nesses debates. Além disso, o artigo permite aprofundar a compreensão de aspetos importantes do pensamento de Mudimbe sobre a biblioteca colonial, lembrando aos leitores a genealogia por ele traçada quando descreve as características da biblioteca colonial e a sua influência contínua (comparada por Mudimbe a um odor persistente), que ainda está por desmantelar.

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V.Y. Mudimbe has left us, and yet his work's life has hardly begun. At a recent memorial service in San Francisco, I addressed his grandchildren (aged 8 and 12), to suggest that we (a collective, admittedly vague and futuristic "we") would need the time it will take for them to get to college in order to prepare the type of broad courses that could more fully account for their grandfather's contributions to what we call "theory" at large. While Mudimbe is a giant in African studies, he has proven less visible in conversations on, say, decolonizing the curriculum—and indeed in the "decolonial" movement itself.[1] This is curious, given the centrality of the concept of the "colonial library" (1988, 181, for example) that, as Mudimbe describes it, opened up, through the centuries, a seemingly unending set of texts for intertextuality, cross-referencing, and constituting a discursive field for the continual construction of an idea of Africa. Mudimbe specifically discusses the gains made in decolonizing knowledge in the African context (1988, 167–86) through deconstruction, rupture, reversal, and by reassessing the influence of Christianity. For Mudimbe, French and African Marxists heralded a credibly and provisionally universal version of history (1988, 177). At the same time, Mudimbe was aware of his own mind's capture by European thought. As a thinker, before all else, his energies were focused on the personal conundrum of how to think outside, beyond, or beside his own submission to Greco-Roman values and Christian normative concepts. When he suggested "the replacement of European languages by African languages," though, the idea had a somewhat different implication than Ngugi's: Mudimbe was deeply interested in a non-hierarchical admixture that would result from this linguistic movement and from which, he surmised, a whole new "mixed and rich world [would] come to light" (1982, 30).[2] But, alongside this type of hybrid newness, it was imperative to establish a "corpus of African traditional texts" (1988, 181).

In other terms, Mudimbe recognized the significance of understanding what it meant "to be an African and a philosopher today" (1988, xi). And, daringly, Mudimbe declared that Foucault, was "an excellent actualization of the Western knowledge of which we would like to rid ourselves" (1982, 25)! In interrogating key European thinkers with deep influence in the social sciences, such as Lévy-Strauss and Foucault, it is to Mudimbe's credit that he posed "philosophical questions of *method*" (1988, 23; my emphasis).

Mudimbe's insights from his rich body of works that spans different genres speak directly to fields and subfields where questions of knowledge, pedagogy, and decolonialism are of critical importance. The very term *gnosis*, preferred by Mudimbe to describe his area of concern, critique, and innovation, rather than the "episteme" or even "philosophy" (although he does use these terms), underscores the need to radically rethink "knowing"—essentially a violent act or one that is based on violence and erasure as far as thought about Africa and the colonizing process more broadly go. Mudimbe considers the concepts and categories in psychoanalysis and ethnopsychology and shifts Althusser's elaboration of Marxian insights on revolution from the realm of political economy to newness in science and the African practice of these sciences. He writes:

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> I would say, then: a system that puts forward a problematic and a certain number of categories will certainly be faithful to the revolution that allowed it to be created; but its terminology and key concepts will account only for this moment. ... Confined to the truth of a single configuration, reduced to a few possibilities made possible by one foundation ... it would only be one scientific discourse among other possible ones. (1982, 10)

Getting to the heart of the matter, Mudimbe writes: "Do the juridical and moral sciences in [African] societies truly and functionally respond to the demands posed by the intersection of our past social formations, the contemporary context of modernity, and the effects of their complex articulation on individual behavior?" (1982, 29). Scaling up Ngugi's radical move to writing in an African language (Gikuyu in Ngugui's case), Mudimbe theorizes a resulting hybrid *gnosis* as a consequence of Africans' exploration of the world through African languages even while using categories that took root in European contexts and languages. This knowledge would be transformed, altered, renewed, and made other in African culture and through African life. And then, in a stunning resurrection of Foucault, drawing from his conversation and deep knowledge of the discourse and milieu of Sartre, Lacan, Althusser, Barthes, and Foucault himself, Mudimbe envisages Derridean rewriting, now unrecognizable, as it would recast the totality of African civilization, life, and future through different means. He thus would ask—before this transformed grid of knowledge systems arrived at through different methods and framed only on a collapsed colonial library that is replaced by the forms generated by African intellectual labor—even *as* an act to be rid of Foucault, in Foucault's very terms: "what is the status of this discourse, what is its order? What sovereignty governs and orients it, and in what direction?" (1982, 30).

Mudimbe is by far the scholar who best navigates the bodies of European work on Africa and the construction of Africa as it is "given" to the world of ideas and histories, those of Africans included. His understanding of the place of Father Placide Tempels (the Belgian missionary who aspired to Philosophy) and the relationship of the latter's work to that of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (the French philosopher with anthropological leanings) opens up an archeological space for understanding the conflicted history of categories and terms used in African philosophy and in scholarly discourse more broadly. Mudimbe traces out this current of thought as it is seen in the writings of the pioneering French anthropologist, Marcel Griaule, whose work on the Dogon developed alongside a fervent desire to show an African philosophy that was on a par with Europe's approach to knowledge and existence (1988, 136–45). Mudimbe also reconstructs, for any willing student, the flow of thought and the resistances and differences between Tempels, his contemporaries, and Alexis Kagame, the Rwandan philosopher that another recently departed African scholar, F. Abiola Irele, was in the process of studying in greater depth. Mudimbe articulates most clearly that the search for "authenticity" in African identity in the postcolonial era demands "a critical philosophy" (1988, 153). He deftly unpacks some of the most salient disagreements and debates among African philosophers of the twentieth century on questions of difference and, in particular, he highlights the entanglement among culture, world view, oral history, and philosophy as a discipline.

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The colonial library imposed a framework that placed limits on knowledge by —among other blockages—making unthinkable the infinite truths, experiences, and concepts that lay outside it. In a more literal way, Mudimbe himself drew heavily from that library—from those European texts—but in privileging African metaphysics or reaching for African categories and rationales, he was involved in reconstructing them (and theorizing their reconstruction) in the process, operating a restructuring not unlike the one he envisaged through the use of African languages.[3] Stated simply, Mudimbe's work has uncovered the way colonialism (and Christianity) generated the colonial library (the vast missionary, ethnographic, governmental, Western historical texts) which specifically obscured "*la chose du texte*" (literally, the thing of the text) (1988, 183) that inheres in African experience, knowledges, structures of thinking, and feeling. These latter are embedded in African histories that constitute the field of *gnosis.* Semiology and hermeneutics, suggested Mudimbe—being, respectively, devoted to signs and constituted by elaborate methods for reading and interpreting those signs—could show the way to building an interconnected African studies (1988, 183). But there is no place for any idealization of "native" institutions, because Mudimbe was too aware of the many instances of their control by indigenous political power, even if a legacy of colonialism. Nor does Mudimbe let us forget that "history" for Africa and the postcolonial world is always to be considered with suspicion, for in it inheres a particular notion of the primitive, lurking in the *negative* of such expressions as "traditional and modern," for example. In his life's work, V.Y. Mudimbe was devoted to felling the colonial library to give us the contours of a new *gnosis.* It is high time we browse through Mudimbe's library—here, literally the tomes of poetry, prose, and theory he left us—to find pathways for then reading more carefully, attentively, and sustainedly from it so we may help build out purposefully from there to further the project of a decolonized library. One which, unlike the colonial library described by Mudimbe, transgresses space and time to overcome the latter's limiting function upon the structures and possibilities of our thought. We might then, in Mudimbe's terms, neutralize "the odor of the father."

Author Biographies. **Anjali Prabhu** is Professor and Edward W. Said Chair in Comparative Literature at UCLA. Her work spans African studies, postcolonial studies, Francophone studies, cinema theory, French theory, and continental philosophy. Her books include *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (SUNY 2007); *Contemporary Cinema of Africa and the Diaspora* (Wiley Blackwell 2014), and the forthcoming edited volume *Aimé Césaire in Context* (from Cambridge University Press). Her essays have appeared in the *PMLA*, *French Forum*, *Diacritics*, *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Literature*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Journal of French and Francophone Studies*, *Cinema Journal*, *International Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, *Levinas Studies*, among others. She is completing a manuscript on eighteenth-century India based on archival materials in four languages.

Notes

1. Two fairly recent examples of books I admire reinforce my opening claim: even an author such as Malcolm Ferdinand in *Decolonial Ecology* (2022), which mentions Mudimbe, seems to miss the opportunity for a real engagement with the potential that Mudimbe's thinking holds for considering, more explicitly, suppressed environmental practices *as a result of* the colonial library and how escaping the slave ship's hold (which Ferdinand examines) is an epistemological act at its core, something for which Mudimbe shows the way. The other is Ato Quayson and Ankhi Mukherjee's excellent *Decolonizing the English Literary Curriculum* (2024), whose expanded idea of canon rightfully

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engages decolonial thinkers such as Mignolo critically and surely operates in a space inherited from Mudimbe's work. It would be interesting to bring Mudimbe's ideas to bear on the literary library and pedagogies they consider. Mudimbe's analysis of Edward Wylmot Blyden, for example, excavates how the Liberian diplomat and Pan-Africanist himself participates in the colonial library and it provides well-thought-through pathways for navigating the type of *problématique* the editors describe regarding how they and their authors use the terms "decolonial and decoloniality" (2024, 3–5); similarly, their description of the decolonial context which engages Memmi, Césaire, Fanon, and others and in detail Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind*, could benefit from connecting these ideas, via Mudimbe, with Mbembe's *Out of the Dark Night* (2024, 7–8) and thus put further pressure on the canon, the literary, and English itself within their enterprise. In-depth discussions of Mudimbe's work—for example, *Reading Mudimbe*, a special issue released by the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (Kresse, 2005), or the recent *Thinking Africa with Mudimbe* (Abdelmadjid et al., 2025)—tend to remain within African studies. Ali A. Mazrui's (2005) essay on Edward Said and Mudimbe showed exactly why the latter should be read alongside Said and other influential scholars who are often situated in postcolonialism more broadly. My own *Contemporary Cinema of Africa and the Diaspora* (2014), while of course referencing Mudimbe, likely underestimates how the ways in which I was conceiving the "Africanizing" of the spectator, including and going well beyond "real" African spectators, might have derived more directly from having been a student of Mudimbe.

2. The very fact that this text, published in 1982 was only translated in 2023, more than forty years later testifies to the delayed appreciation of Mudimbe in the broader intellectual sphere. The odor of the father here refers to the encompassing and enduring presence of colonial structures of thoughts and categories, myths and other legacies that highjack authentic African forms of *gnosis.*

3. Although Mudimbe had studied, apart from Greek and Latin, a number of European languages beyond French, his idea of the role of African languages remains theoretical. His knowledge of Swahili, Sanga, Songye, and Kinyarwanda fell out of use fairly early and French dominated in both the Benedictine monastery and the university as well as in the nuclear family with his wife and children (personal communication from Elisabeth Mudimbé-Boyi, October 5, 2025).

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