

**AN AFROCENTRIC CRITIQUE OF MUDIMBE'S BOOK,
THE INVENTION OF AFRICA: GNOSIS, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE
ORDER OF KNOWLEDGE**

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this analysis is chapter I: DISCOURSE OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE OF OTHERNESS, in Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*(TIOA). The aim is to provide an understanding of the elements Mudimbe borrows from his culture and tradition and how he is situated in that culture and tradition. Through this analysis I seek to locate the author making an Afrocentric assessment of this work based on the three paradigmatic approaches in the discipline of Africology: functional, categorical and etymological. Location theory will also be used as a basis of this assessment. Asante, as cited in Welsh-Asante (1993p.57), expounds on Considerations of Location Theory when he asserts: "Location theory is a branch of centric theory and reflects the same interest as centric theory on the question of place. It is essentially a process of explaining how human beings come to make decisions about the external world which takes into consideration all of the attitudes and behaviors which constitute psychological and cultural place."

PURPOSE

The book attempts a kind of archaeology of African gnosis as a system of knowledge in which important or major philosophical questions have arisen concerning first the form, the content, and the style of "Africanizing" knowledge; and second, the status of traditional systems of thought and their possible relation to the normative genre of knowledge (TIOA, 1988,p.x). Mudimbe's intent is to investigate and discuss the themes of the foundations of discourse about Africa. Therefore, what he attempts is a critical synthesis of the complex questions about knowledge and power in and of Africa. What is being asked is "What is the basis for discussions about Africa, and from where and whom did it come?" According to Dr. Mudimbe, "discourses have not only sociohistorical origins but also epistemological contexts." Since epistemology is a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge, one should consider, as Dr. Mudimbe contends, "the origins of the philosophies which support or negate these discourses to be the catalyst which makes these discourses possible and which can also account for them in an essential way."

Mudimbe argues that the various discourses themselves establish the worlds of thought in which people conceive their identity. Western anthropologist and missionaries have introduced distortions not only for outsiders but also for Africans trying to understand themselves (TIOA, backcover).

What Mudimbe does is try to combine diverse conceptions into a coherent whole; he goes on an intellectual voyage of discovering who he is from a position outside his culture. He views his culture as Other.

CHAPTER I: DISCOURSE OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE OF OTHERNESS

An epistemological analysis of Africanism is offered--an examination of the limits and validity of African tradition and cultural knowledge. The focus is on the European and Africanist interpretations of African history and African philosophy; Mudimbe contends, the colonial experience manifest a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and cultures (VJM,1988,p.1). What he does, however, is address the issue from an other than Afrocentric perspective.

Structure of Argument

Mudimbe constructs his argument around themes. In this chapter, the purpose is to discuss the theme: The restructuring of Africa. Mudimbe attempts an illustration of how the basis for discussion of Africa comes from the genesis of philosophies that deny or affirm discourse on Africa. The subtopics of the chapter are: Colonizing structure and marginality; Discursive formations and otherness; and African genesis.

Discussion

The colonizing structure is significant to Mudimbe's analysis of discourse; I believe his view of the structure is addressed from a Eurocentric perspective:

The two words derive from the Latin word colere, meaning to cultivate or to design. Indeed the historical colonial experience does not and obviously cannot reflect the peaceful connotations of these words (colonization and colonialism). But it can be admitted that the colonists, as well as the colonialist have all tended to organize and

transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs (p.1).

His discussion places the African and the interest of the African as object of the inquiry. Africa is referred to from an imperialistic perspective. In order to address an issue from a Afrocentric perspective the African should be subject.

Colonization changed the constructs of Africa from Afrocentric to Eurocentric. The restructuring of Africa according to Mudimbe encompasses three general areas: exploitation of the physical land and space; the domination of the mind and body; and the infusion of western ideas into a civilization that was already established.

Mudimbe's reference to discussions on colonialism and its inconsistency with economic development, emphasizes his point of Africa not having an economic system. His choice of various discourses about the colonial experience of Africa seemed to be a bit confusing. While his notion of colonialism where economic growth is concerned is accurate, his comment on colonialism as an historical accident, is not approached Afrocentrically. Mudimbe has this to say in response to Fieldhouse's view that colonialism was a "largely unplanned and ...transient phase in the evolving relationship between more and less developed parts of the world":

Thus colonialism has been some kind of historical accident which on the whole, according to this view, was not the worst thing that could have happened to the black continent.(p.3)

This remark indicates dislocation. Although I did not find Mudimbe to declare to be an Afrocentrist, I'm aware Mudimbe is an African writing about African phenomena. This is an instance where he discusses data about Africans from the perspective of the European, not the African.

Although Dr. Mudimbe depicts the negative ramifications of European intervention in Africa and points out that the colonizing structure is responsible for marginality, I do not believe he is addressing the issue from an Afrocentric perspective. His discussion places the African and the interests of the African as object of the inquiry. The context of views presented---the environment which is history seems to place Mudimbe outside his own historical experiences. According to Asante (1990), "the decapitated text is the contribution of the author who writes with no discernible African element; the aim appears to be to distance herself or himself from the African cultural self."

Although the author's philosophical support leans toward the European, he has obvious creative abilities as demonstrated in the multidisciplinary scope of his work. However, he shows less concern with disciplinary issues than with the arrangement of forces that account for the establishment and transfiguration of discourses. Additionally, the complexity of Mudimbe's subjects does not yield a clear direction. His concern is not with determining if the discourses of history and

anthropology reflect an objective African reality but with looking at the conditions that allow for their possibility. And in so doing he indicates a direction away from the African experience. In order to address an issue from an Afrocentric perspective the African should be subject.

In an attempt to show how marginality---underdevelopment is derived from colonial structure, Mudimbe describes what he refers to as the intermediate space. His reference to discourse is offered in support of his contention that this "space could be viewed as the major signifier of underdevelopment. It reveals the strong tension between a modernity that often is an illusion of development, and a tradition that sometimes reflects a poor image of a mythical past" (TIOA, pg.5). He asserts, that this space and the apparent contradictions to modernization forces one to look at the models and meanings of renewing Africa. Although what Mudimbe offers is a view of how this "marginal space" functions as evidence of the pressure which encourages social scientist to reevaluate modernization programs, he brings his view and the views of others from the point of the anthropologist, not the African. He chooses terms not created by the African; his language denotes the author is not placed in his own center. Mudimbe contends: "Marginality designates the intermediate space between the so-called African tradition and the project modernity of colonialism. It is apparently an urbanized space in which, as noted by S. Amin, "vestiges of the past.....that are still living realities (tribal ties, for example), often continue to hide the new structures." His reference to African tradition as "so-called" is perceived in a deprecatory sense. Several choices of reference, including Amin and his use of pejorative terms (tribal ties), urges one to consider also the direction of Mudimbe's interest. There seems to be a tendency along the lines of Eurocentric space.

Mudimbe seems to choose language and a style which corresponds with a Europe centered approach; he portrays the situation of the colonizing structure from the perspective of the colonist---the European.

Several factors influence my determination of Mudimbe's dislocation. The author borrows elements from outside his culture and tradition. Those borrowed elements as depicted herein, seem to have a common influence on the way Mudimbe expresses himself in this work. Asante (1990), informs us of the elements of locating a text; a text must be seen in the light of language, attitude, and direction when the serious reader wants to locate it. From the writers' own textual expression the Afrocentric critic is able to ascertain the cultural address of the author (Asante,1990).

In Mudimbe's discussion of Discursive formations and Otherness, he cites, P. Boule, Seidman, and Turgot in his treatment of the African aesthetic. His view on the issues that come from paintings from the 15 century on, and the allocation of an "African object" to 19th century anthropology, is offered from the perspective of the anthropologist. In his discussion of African art, and his references, Mudimbe relies heavily on Foucault as well as Levi-Strauss. If Mudimbe buys into the anthropological constructs of Levi-Strauss, one must consider the direction of his interest to be toward Euro-centric constructs.

Mudimbe's reference to African objects, and his choice of quotes reflect a western view of art forms. The discourse presented in this section, which is demeaning to the African, is purely in the interest of what African art symbolizes to the European. Mudimbe's reference to African art forms is consistent with those in his European citations. For example, "These objects, which perhaps are not art at all in their "native context," become art by being given simultaneously an aesthetic character and a potentiality for producing and reproducing other artistic forms" (TIOA,p.10). When he discusses standards for art that come from "inside the power-knowledge field of cultures" in his reference to African art, he seems to distance himself from African culture. His identification with the African aesthetic seems to be minimized while he seems to embrace the notion of a European aesthetic view. There is no affirmation of the African aesthetic. His attitude leans toward a Eurocentric range of influence.

According to Welsh-Asante (1993), even though Mudimbe's work....will undoubtedly continue to have influence among those who study the aesthetic of Africa, it does not make a major contribution to our understanding of aesthetics. She further adds, "it is truly disconcerting for an African scholar to be so pre-occupied with seeking approval from the European community" (Welsh-Asante,1993p.252).

Mudimbe's contention that anthropological discourses on human varieties forms a power-knowledge political system which opposes the "other" or the African may be accurate but is done so from other than an Afrocentric perspective. The subtle quality of the author's expression of ideas about Africa, and the various choices of reference, places doubt on his view of the world, and his place in it. The African seems to be viewed as the object or phenomenon of discussion as opposed to the subject or theme of discussion. To be Afrocentric is to understand/portray African people as subjects in human experiences (Asante,1990).

In the final part of Mudimbe's discussion in this chapter, he uses what he says is: "Frobenius's expression, African Genesis"(p.16). He considers the expansion of scientific models by social scientists and locality of the theory of the nature of Africa's invention, and its meaning for African discourse and Africa gnosis. Mudimbe seems to uphold the European perspective as well as use deprecatory language toward the African in his choice of references and variety of words. For example: Mudimbe emphasizes that selective Europe-centered philosophies, theories, and consequently scientific models and policies developed to suit ---- maintain colonial structures, and brought with them interpretations and designations for original beings and things. In his emphasis, he associates "colonies," material value, and the "mother country" with "savages" and "primitives" (TIOA,p.17). Although the author maintains that the "idea of history" and therefore the ideology of Africa is rooted in the Western experience and stems from those in power and the controlling forces, i.e., European economies and structures, he maintains his reference to the "dependent colonies" and to the African from an other than Afrocentric perspective.

Mudimbe suggests that levels and types of interpretations of Africa were distinguished by Western inventors of an "African genesis." He illustrates the necessity of distinguishing kinds of African knowledge. He cites the academic achievements of scholars to validate the point of the knowledge of Africa coming from a European construct. He states that it is a problem that African scholars base their knowledge and methods on the European constructs. Therefore, he charges the scholar who seeks a new understanding of human history with posing philosophical questions of method in the face of contradictory reports.

Although Mudimbe depicts the negative ramifications of European intervention in Africa and points out the mind control strategies of the European, I feel that he is writing from a European perspective. It is just a sympathetic European perspective. The African, as I see it, is not the subject of his discussion.

Although the focus of this analysis is on chapter one of the book where I indicated dislocation, on the whole, the author concerns himself with various themes of which, in at least one, I believe he writes Afrocentrically. The themes addressed include: the foundations of discourse about Africa; the articulation between missionary language and its African echo or negation, and the ultimate consequences of this relationship for the anthropologist; a gnosis philosophy on the order of things in African civilization; the fundamental theme in Blyden's writings; and anthropology.

The fundamental theme in Blyden's writings is that Africans, from a historical point of view, constitute a universe apart (from Europe), and have their own history and traditions. The discussion on Blyden indicates Afrocentric thinking. Without the benefit of the historical research about African history which we have available today, there is a discussion of critical issues from an African point of view. In this part of the text, I believe that the author writes from an Afrocentric perspective.

Functionally, Mudimbe's general direction of thought leans toward Europe. Categorically, there is a problem as, Mudimbe deals with themes that focus on the marginal detachment from "place" that Europeans historical realities have used to form "universal" theories and concepts.

Although Mudimbe is aware of the deep-seated ethnocentric European structure of knowledge, whereas in the formal bodies of academic knowledge, only the European knowledge is considered universal, he works in part within the confines of a European episteme.

Mudimbe also addresses one way or another the scheme issue in his treatment of the various recognitions, philosophies and methods, and the systems of knowledge in and of Africa.

Etymologically, there is another problem; Mudimbe uses words and phrases which bear derogatory meanings from our perspective as Africologist. Words and phrases such as, tribe, savage, Bantu, barbarous, etc. are in Mudimbe's book. There is evidence of dislocation. However, there were instances where Mudimbe places the African in the subject position rather than object position and writes from an Afrocentric perspective.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, and in terms of location, I have considered Mudimbe to be bi-positional. I believe the following statement Mudimbe makes in the book exemplifies his position: "Western tradition of science, as well as the trauma of slave trade and colonization, are part of Africa's present day heritage" (p.79) He believes, as he states, that he has a right to exploit any part of this heritage (TIOAp.79).

Although, as stated herein, Mudimbe, to my knowledge, does not verbally declare to be an Afrocentrist, I believe he is a person who pursues things of interest to the intellect; Mudimbe has authored over 20 books, some on Africa and some in the "traditional" disciplines, specifically philosophy; sociology; linguistics; and philology. He received the *Herskovits Award* for the outstanding English language scholarly work on Africa for the *Invention of Africa*. He was the recipient of many other honors including *Senior Fulbright Scholar*, University Center of International Studies, University of Pittsburgh. He is co-author of many books and publications, and he has written reviews of book on a regular basis. He also speaks several languages. Therefore, in an intellectual sense, Mudimbe has declared to be an Afrocentrist, who has worked in many fields, and since 1991 has worked in the field of Cultural Anthropology, at Duke University. For insight on the Africanist from "traditional" fields Asante (1992) offers a view:

There are two general fields in which the Afrocentrist works: cultural/aesthetics and social/behavioral. This means that the person who declares in an intellectual sense to be an Afrocentrist commits traditional discipline suicide because one cannot, to be consistent, remain a traditional Eurocentric intellectual and an Afrocentrist. Of course, there are those who might be bi-positional or multi-positional under given circumstances (Asante, 1992p.17).

In view of the forgoing statements, and under the circumstances, I believe the "control" element of the environment might influence the author's position. Because Mudimbe has been trained in the Western tradition, and he is dislocated in this work, he seeks acceptance from the "dominant culture" (the oppressor) to which this work is directed. And he also received academic recognition for this work from the oppressor (honor presented by the U.S. African Studies Assoc.). Academic recognition may empower Mudimbe to adjust his position toward a more centered approach in subsequent intellectual work; Therefore, the potential for Mudimbe's attempt at relocation has not been ruled out by this critic. While I am reminded his work is the

product of his social milieu, I presume that this intellectual African may have positioned himself in such a way as a strategic attempt at impending relocation. Asante(1990), expounds on the concept of Location:

Relocation occurs when a writer who has been dislocated rediscovers historical and cultural motifs that serve as sign-posts in the intellectual or creative pursuit. (Asante, 1990p.136).

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