

# BOOK REVIEW

**Pierre-Philippe Fraiture and Daniel Orrells, editors. *The Mudimbe Reader*.** Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. xiv + 239 pp. Acknowledgements. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8139-3911-7.

How does one read such a rich, complex, erudite, and at times contradictory thinker as Valentin Mudimbe? Considering the long—and ongoing—intellectual production of one of the most prolific African writers, what to read? Where to start? In two hundred and eighty pages, including a general introduction and a comprehensive bibliography, *The Mudimbe Reader* judiciously gathers twelve texts that illuminate the scholar's work without sacrificing the nuances and intricacies of his arguments. One of the book's most welcome contributions is the timely compilation of several articles, some translated into English for the first time, whose publication in their original language has become hard to find and yet forms the premise of Mudimbe's entire epistemology. "Western Legacy and Negro Consciousness" and "Herodotus the Liar," for example, both skillfully translated by Myles O'Byrne for this *Reader*, foreground Mudimbe's desire to insinuate himself into old structures of domination in order to wrench their ideological production and turn them into instruments of critique.

Just as timely is the selection of major excerpts from Mudimbe's more well-known works, such as *The Invention of Africa* and *Parables and Fables*. Indeed, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture's and Daniel Orrells's careful selection of theoretical texts gives the reader a soft introduction into the style and philosophy of the Congolese thinker. "E.W. Blyden's Legacy and Questions," an essay that theorizes self-determination and Black nationalism in Africa at the same time as it references nineteenth-century essentialist theories about race borrowed from European sources, is undoubtedly one of the pivotal chapters of *The Invention of Africa*. Like other essays in the collection, it presents Valentin Mudimbe as a thinker who refuses easy periodization. Its force resides not in Blyden's ambiguities but in the more complicit relationship between African history and Western anthropology in which Blyden was caught. As the editors write in their general introduction, "Rather than discover the African reality that might lie on the other side of these discourses, Mudimbe analyzes how anthropological and missionary interpretations created powerful paradigms that in turn influenced Africans who have understood their own culture and thought according to Western models" (xxii).

To focus Mudimbe's theoretical trajectory, the editors truncate the body of some of the original texts, especially those from Mudimbe's monographs. Most of the cuts consist in shortening or deleting long quotes and invite the reader to check the full text in the original publication.

In its laudable endeavor to filter through and organize some lengthy and thematically related essays, *The Mudimbe Reader* categorizes the twelve essays into four distinct parts: The Nation, Anthropology and the Postcolonial, Classical Antiquity and African Modernity, and Visual Culture—each composed of three texts and introduced by a separate introduction. Reading “A Meeting with L.G. Damas,” however, one wonders why an interview about the legacy of Negritude for Africans on the continent and in the diaspora is placed in “The Nation.” The essay certainly shows Mudimbe's delicate position vis-à-vis the preceding generation of thinkers and statesmen who led most African countries to independence, but it has little to say about the nation or nationalism. If anything, as the editors remark, the essay “is staged-managed by a narrator who is often close to worshipping the poet” (9). Radically different in style from the article that immediately precedes it—“The rigors of economics,” a piece that reads Jacques Austry's *Le scandale du développement* and that the editors present as a “very Mudimbean multilayered examination of commentaries on ... commentaries” (6)—the interview with Damas shines by its clarity. Before Damas, Mudimbe is not the philosopher critiquing a colonial epistemological violence to redeem it for social and political use, but the young scholar who pays his dues to the ideology of Negritude—a message conveyed not so much in the content of the interview but in its form: a hybrid version between a dialogue and a diary. Similarly, the essay “What is the Real Thing,” a structuralist study of African mythology inspired by a Lévi-Straussian methodology, resonates with the theme of the book's Part II: “Anthropology and the Postcolonial.” It is, however, not so much a postcolonial critique of anthropology as it is an attempt to practice anthropological writing from within the discourse of a Western discipline. Indeed, the editors reveal in the general introduction (xxviii) that Mudimbe's primary source is Luc de Heusch's 1972 book, *Le Roi ivre ou l'origine de l'État* (*The Drunken King, or, The Origin of the State*), which offers a rare opportunity to see Mudimbe at work: settling in the very material he criticizes to “affirmatively sabotage” it.

Consistent with the philosopher's methodology that this reader emphasizes, the essays in the last two parts of the book illustrate a settling in contradictions leading to their implosions. In Part III, “When Was Africa Discovered” denounces the conundrums within the aesthetics of Negritude and defines the movement as an oxymoronic “full-fledged beautiful monster” (147). In “In the House of Libya,” an essay merging classical philology and modern epistemology, Mudimbe argues against Ernest Mercier and Marcel Bénabou, two colonial scholars who tried to find an “structural homology between nineteenth-century type of colonialization and the Greek colonies” (158) instead of focusing, as he does, on the concurrent tension between ancient and modern representations of Africa. In Part IV, those tensions in

representations of Africa are approached from Valentin Mudimbe's more recent intervention in the field of Visual Culture. "From 'Primitive Art' to 'Memoriae Loci'" provides the reader with another moment that illustrates the untenability of the current artistic discourse on African art. For Mudimbe, the "ethnologization" (191) and "aestheticization" (192) of African aesthetics are two contradicting operations that simultaneously isolate African art as deviant and welcome it as fecund. And in the *Reader's* last essay, "Reprendre," a polysemic French word that the author refuses to translate, Mudimbe analyzes the contradiction between a defense of an "African cultural heritage" and the adoption of its modern technique "coming from the French École Nationale d'Aubusson" (207).

In the end, one of the *Reader's* most valuable contributions is to walk us through what unifies Mudimbe's rich, complex, and erudite intellectual production. We close the book being at the center of a contradiction: having read enough (to become familiar with a prominent thinker) and wanting to read more (of the thinker's seemingly never-ending sphere of influence)—just like Mudimbe's epistemological project.

Yohann C. Ripert  
Stetson University  
Deland, Florida  
yripert@stetson.edu

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### For more reading on this subject, see:

- African Studies Review. 2018. "Decolonizing African Studies." *African Studies Review* 61 (3): 1–7. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.97.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. 1985. "African Gnosis: Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge." *African Studies Review* 28 (2–3): 149–233. doi:10.2307/524605.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan. 1987. "Africa and the Imperative of philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration." *African Studies Review* 30 (1): 79–100. doi:10.2307/524505.