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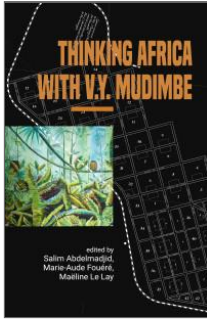
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Under the direction of Salim Abdelmadjid, Marie-Aude Fouéré and Maëline Le Lay

Thinking Africa with V.Y. Mudimbe

Introduction: Thinking Africa with V.Y. Mudimbe

Salim Abdelmadjid, Marie-Aude Fouéré and Maëline Le Lay

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Introduction:

Thinking Africa with V.Y. Mudimbe

Salim Abdelmadjid, Marie-Aude Fouéré, Maëline Le Lay

The philosophical and literary work of V.Y. Mudimbe provides us with a decisive critical foundation for thinking Africa.¹ From the time of *L'autre face du royaume. Une introduction à la critique des langages en folie* (1973), and his later works such as *L'odeur du père. Essai sur des limites de la science et de la vie en Afrique Noire* (1982), *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1988), and *The Idea of Africa* (1994), Mudimbe has shown that Africa as we know it today is the product of an exogenous, asymmetrical historical construction, of extreme violence, that has constitutionally biased the supposedly scientific knowledge about African societies. In his view, Africa therefore requires a theoretical reappropriation by Africans, inseparable from the practical reappropriation in the liberation struggles.

These premises—the scientific value and emancipatory power of Mudimbe's epistemological critique, and its necessity for the epistemic de-asymmetrisation to be pursued—were the starting point for the organisation of the symposium “Thinking Africa with Mudimbe” at the University of Nairobi in 2019, of which this book is an extension.² In addition to the chapters by researchers in philosophy (Salim Abdelmadjid, Francis

1. The French version of this introduction can be found in the digital version of this book, available online in the “Africae Studies” series on OpenEdition Books (“Introduction: Penser l'Afrique avec V.Y. Mudimbe.” <https://books.openedition.org/africae/7142>).

2. The symposium was the result of a collaboration between the University of Nairobi's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies and the Institut français de recherche en Afrique (IFRA), Nairobi. It was organised by Marie-Aude Fouéré, Maëline Le Lay and Karori Mbugua at the University of Nairobi on 17 December 2019. It included the following discussions: Francis E.A. Owakah (Philosophy, University of Nairobi), “Introducing Mudimbe to East Africa: The Good, the Fun and the Ugly”; Pierre-Philippe Fraiture (Literature, University of Warwick, United Kingdom), “V.Y. Mudimbe's Modernities?”; Kai Kresse (Institute of Social & Cultural Anthropology, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Germany), “Entanglement and Critique: Eurocentrism, Africanism—and Beyond? Thinking Mudimbe”; Oriare Nyarwath (Philosophy, University of Nairobi), “Beyond the Invented Africa”; Reginald M.J. Oduor (Philosophy, University of Nairobi), “The Relevance of V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* to Future Directions in the Humanities and Social Sciences”; Salim Abdelmadjid (Philosophy, Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès, France), “Reading V.Y. Mudimbe towards a Concept of Africa.”

Owakah, and Kai Kresse who is also an anthropologist) and literature (Pierre-Philippe Fraiture and Alex Nelungo Wanjala), the book features an interview by Maëline Le Lay of the visual artist and video maker Sammy Baloji, whose installation “A Blueprint for Toads and Snakes,” partly influenced by Mudimbe’s thinking, was showcased at the symposium.³ The book also includes a previously unpublished translation, by Emelyn Lih, of an excerpt from Mudimbe’s autobiography *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres. Esquisse d’un jardin africain à la bénédictine*,⁴ which will allow us to hear his voice, will resonate with several chapters of the book, and will also introduce a lesser-known facet of Mudimbe in the English-speaking context, as not all his literary works have been translated.

In comparison to the importance we attribute to it, Mudimbe’s work is not yet sufficiently well known in France and Kenya, which are the first two countries of reference for this book. In France, the recent translation of *The Invention of Africa*, which was published by Présence africaine under the title *L’invention de l’Afrique. Gnose, philosophie et ordre de la connaissance* (2021), and the publication, also by Présence africaine, of the collective work *Afrika N’Ko* (Diawara, Diouf, and Ouedraogo 2022), subtitled *La bibliothèque coloniale en débat* (*Debating the African Colonial Library* in the English version), have brought new attention to Mudimbe’s thinking. This last work invites us on a “quest to establish plurality in theoretical perspectives” (ibid., 34), which is necessary to “deconstruct conceptual and political systems founded on slavery, colonization and contemporary forms of domination” (ibid., 39). In the English-speaking world, the recent translation by Jonathan Adjemian of *L’odeur du père* (1982) under the title *The Scent of the Father: Essay on the Limits of Life and Science in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Mudimbe 2023), as well as the volume *Africa Beyond Inventions: Essays in Honour of V.Y. Mudimbe* edited by Zubairu Wai (2024), are other signs of the growing recognition of Mudimbe’s work. It is our hope that this volume will contribute to its dissemination.

3. The installation was exhibited at the Alliance Française de Nairobi from 16 to 20 December 2019. The symposium and installation were accompanied by a public debate held on 16 December entitled “Thinking Africa through the works of the philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe” organised at the Alliance Française de Nairobi by Maëline Le Lay, moderated by Pierre Boizette, and with contributions by Sammy Baloji, Kai Kresse, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, and Reginald M.J. Oduor.

4. This can be translated as: *The Glorious Bodies of Words and Beings. Sketch of an African Benedictine Garden.*

1. Thinking and knowing Africa with V.Y. Mudimbe

What does “thinking Africa” mean, and why “thinking Africa?” In Mudimbe’s work, these questions inseparably arise for the purpose of “knowing Africa.” On the one hand, this link is obvious. It has to do with the complementary relationship between thought and knowledge: it is necessary to think a thing—not just to conceive it, but to grasp its meaning—in order to know it; and it is necessary to know a thing—not just to know it exists, but to have studied it—in order to think it. But, on the other hand, the link between “thinking Africa” and “knowing Africa” has been deeply problematic. The relationship between knowledge and power, historically carried out in the case of Africa as a relationship between discourses claiming to be scientific about Africa and colonialism, explains the need to liberate thinking about Africa from these discourses and, to do this, to think critically about knowledge of Africa and ways of knowing about Africa, starting with what Mudimbe calls “the colonial library”⁵ and with the colonial categories of knowledge.

Mudimbe is at the heart of this tension between thinking and knowing Africa. Right from *L’autre face du royaume* (1973) and *L’odeur du père* (1982), he has made the possibility of knowing Africa conditional on understanding its meaning, and to that end on deconstructing the colonial idea of Africa, which was a negation of the meaning and understanding of the real Africa. “[A] Western epistemological order,” Mudimbe wrote in *The Invention of Africa* and *The Idea of Africa* (Mudimbe 1994, xv), has made Africa an ensemble of “‘fantasies’ and ‘constructs’” (ibid.) that have been laid over reality: Africa has been conceived of as primitive, exotic and immobile, frozen in the repetition of tradition, without history. “(...) under the guise of discovering and speaking Africa,” colonial sciences, ethnology in particular, only presented Africa “through a distorting prism” (Mudimbe 2023 [1982], 8). Subjected to the colonial matrix and the Western *episteme*, these sciences have failed, according to Mudimbe,

5. Mudimbe gives the following definition in *The Idea of Africa*: “It was, I think, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe that invented the savage as a representation of its own negated double. Exploiting travelers’ and explorers’ writings, at the end of the nineteenth century a ‘colonial library’ begins to take shape. It represents a body of knowledge constructed with the explicit purpose of faithfully translating and deciphering the African object. Indeed, it fulfilled a political project in which, supposedly, the object unveils its being, its secrets, and its potential to a master who could, finally, domesticate it. Certainly, the depth as well as the ambition of the colonial library disseminates the concept of deviation as the best symbol of the idea of Africa. I do refer to this colonial library, which beyond its adjustments and arrangements offers traces or reflections of a longer tradition. In fact, I have tried to circumvent its epistemological violence by including its nightmares as well as the fragile presuppositions of its ponderous knowledge.” (Mudimbe 1994, xii).

to create a real knowledge of Africa. Instead, “a paradigm of [essentialised] difference” (Mudimbe 1994, xii) from Europe has prevailed: Africa is what Europe, and more broadly the West, is not; it is conceptually, to use Mudimbe’s words, its “negated double” (ibid.). According to him, getting rid of the Western epistemic order requires us to think Africa, which includes criticising this order and, so as to do that, studying it, but also, following the well-understood complementarity of thought and knowledge, studying Africa itself in the diversity of its singular situations.

Mudimbe’s proposal to take Africa itself as the subject of philosophical reflection constitutes a decisive contribution to the contemporary field of African philosophy,⁶ following a generation which, for reasons that history explains,⁷ had above all been primarily concerned with the very definition of African philosophy, notably within the framework of the contradiction between ethnophilosophy⁸ and “rational, or theoretical, or critical, or professional philosophy”⁹ (Fløistad 1987, 1), and with the directly political question of emancipation and affirmation.¹⁰ Mudimbe

6. The emergence of the field of African philosophy is often dated to 1945, with the publication of *La philosophie bantoue* by Placide Tempels—translated into English as *Bantu Philosophy* in 1959. In this book, Tempels, who was a Belgian missionary in the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), claimed to set out, on the basis of his observations of Congolese society, what we could call the “system of thought” or “worldview” of that society, and even, according to the title of the book, of any “Bantu” society, with the aim of contributing to the colonial administration of the Congolese population (Tempels 1945). Dating the emergence of the field of African philosophy to the publication of *La philosophie bantoue* is obviously problematic. Firstly, we can confidently assume that there was philosophy in Africa before 1945. Secondly, it is astonishing to date the emergence of the field of African philosophy to the publication of a book whose author is not African. Thirdly, philosophy does not consist of collective “systems of thought” or “worldviews.” Finally, and most importantly, it seems impossible to date appearance to the publication of a book whose author sees its function as contributing to the colonial oppression of Africans.

7. In the African context of the post-Second World War era, then of independence, the priority was to demonstrate the existence of an African philosophy and thereby provide, against the colonial negation of the very ability of Africans to philosophise and therefore of the very possibility of an African philosophy, further proof of the humanity commonly shared by Africans and colonisers.

8. “Ethnophilosophy” refers to the practice, initiated by Tempels in *La philosophie bantoue* (1945), of extracting a “worldview” from the observation of a society.

9. Represented notably by Fabien Eboussi Boulaga in “Le Bantou problématique” (1968), by Marcien Towa in *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l’Afrique actuelle* (1971), and by Paulin Jidenu Hountondji in *Sur la “philosophie africaine”* (1977)—translated into English in 1983 under the title *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Hountondji and Towa created the concept of ethnophilosophy, which they criticise.

10. See Salim Abdelmadjid’s chapter. Of course, Africa as such had already been constantly taken as a subject for philosophical reflection, “at least implicitly, in the history of pan-Africanism, eminently during independences, for example in Fanon or

calls for us to start again from the empirical reality—which he also calls, in French, “*la chose du texte*” in *The Invention of Africa* (1988)—based on an inner, intimate knowledge of that reality. In his view, we should use *gnosis* as our fulcrum: that is, a wide-ranging ensemble of knowledge immersed in African realities, practices and ways of life, quite distinct from Western “*doxa* or opinion” (Mudimbe 1988, ix) or from “*episteme*, understood as both science and general intellectual configuration” (ibid.). *Gnosis* is thus a “methodological tool” (ibid.) or an epistemic matrix, different from Western *episteme* without being totally separated from it, which would make it possible to study and reflect on African situations and experiences.¹¹

Taking Africa itself as the subject of philosophical reflection does not mean reducing it to itself so as to study it in isolation, which would be tantamount to abstracting it. It means, on the contrary, since Africa is in the world and this is part of its definition, to think and study it within the horizon of the world.¹² Mudimbe’s work therefore by definition goes beyond the boundaries of African studies. Historically, it is part of an intellectual context in which the epistemological foundations of colonial knowledge and its epistemic effects in all regions of the world were radically called into question. Mudimbe’s critique of Africanism is thus inseparable from Edward Said’s critique of orientalism in *Orientalism* (1978). They actually both draw on the thinking of Michel Foucault, in particular on his thematisation of the relations between knowledge and power, his concept of *episteme*, and his archaeological approach to exploring the foundations of knowledge (Alix 2008,¹³ Bisanswa 2000, Mangeon 2006). In *The Idea of Latin America* (2005), Walter Mignolo makes explicit his association with Mudimbe’s critique, his colleague at Duke University, of the colonial construction and essentialisation of extra-European areas.¹⁴

Nkrumah among so many; but the explicit and properly philosophical nature of the position of the question [“What is Africa?”] set Mudimbe apart” in the contemporary history of African philosophy.

11. *Gnosis* also has an “esoteric dimension” (Mangeon 2013, our translation), as Mudimbe makes clear from the outset (Mudimbe 1988, ix).

12. For many intellectuals who worked with Mudimbe or have been inspired by him, Africa is even the place from which to think the world (see e.g. Jewsiewicki 1996, Mbembe & Sarr 2017).

13. See also Alix (2022).

14. See also Walter Mignolo’s recent article “Africa in the Colonial Horizon of Western Modernity: 1652-2000” (Mignolo 2022), which begins: “I would like to take this opportunity to honor the legacy of Valentin Y. Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (1988).”

2. Who is V.Y. Mudimbe?

Valentin-Yves Mudimbe was born in 1941 in the Congo, then colonised by Belgium (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), in Jadotville (now Likasi), in the province of Katanga, in the southeast of the country. He received a Catholic education, studying at the minor seminary and then the major seminary, and intending to become a priest. In 1960, he took up the Benedictine habit and was sent to the monastery of Gihindamuyaga in Rwanda. He left the monastery in 1962, distraught by the ethnic massacres that were shaking Rwanda at the time. He studied Romance philology at the University of Lovanium in Léopoldville (Kinshasa) and obtained a doctorate in French linguistics at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. What he called his “intellectual odyssey” in *Parables and Fables* (Mudimbe 1991a, ix) began, between the University of Nanterre in Paris, where he taught as a lecturer just after May 1968, and Louvain, where he continued to visit the library regularly. He was subsequently appointed professor in the Department of Romance Philology at the National University of Zaire (UNAZA) in Lubumbashi, and Dean of the Faculty of Letters from 1972 to 1974. In 1980, faced with Mobutu’s dictatorship and attempts to intimidate him, Mudimbe went into exile in Europe and then the United States. He taught at Haverford University, Stanford University, and then Duke University until his retirement in the mid-2010s (Amuri-Mpala Lutebele 2009; Kishiba Fitula 2021). In the 1970s, because of Mobutu’s policy of so-called “authenticity” and the injunction to “Zairianise” the country, including proper names, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe changed his first name to Vumbi Yoka. Since then, he has signed his writings “V.Y. Mudimbe.”

Mudimbe’s work belongs to several fields, mainly philosophy and literature, African studies and postcolonial studies, and covers several domains, notably epistemology, history and politics. We have mentioned several works of philosophy. Among his many works of literature, we can mention *Déchirures*, a collection of poems published in 1971, of which, to our knowledge, there is no English translation;¹⁵ *Entre les eaux*, a novel published in 1973, translated into English as *Between Tides* in 1991; *Shaba deux. Les carnets de Mère Marie-Gertrude* in 1989, about the Kolwezi wars, of which, to our knowledge, there is no complete English translation.

The richness and singularity of Mudimbe’s work have prompted numerous studies and commentaries. There is therefore an extensive bibliography on Mudimbe which explores the different facets of his

15. The title of this collection can be translated as *Tears*. These are not the tears which flow down our cheeks, but those which tear pages and muscles.

philosophical and literary work. This bibliography is difficult to access, however, notably because of the linguistic polarity of the international academic field. Indeed, the exegeses of his philosophical texts come mainly from the English-speaking academic field, while his literary writings are mostly analysed within the French-speaking field. Works in French include: *V.Y. Mudimbe ou le discours, l'écart et l'écriture*¹⁶ by Bernard Mouralis in 1988; the collective work *L'Afrique au miroir des littératures. Mélanges offerts à V.Y. Mudimbe*,¹⁷ co-edited by Mukala Kadima-Nzuji and Sélom Komlan Gbanou in 2003; *V.Y. Mudimbe et la ré-invention de l'Afrique. Poétique et politique de la décolonisation des sciences humaines*¹⁸ by Kasereka Kavwahirehi in 2006; or Jean-Pierre Bekolo's lengthy interview with Mudimbe, “*Les choses et les mots de Mudimbe*,” in 2015, filmed at the thinker's home, which provides a vivid insight into Mudimbe's thinking in his teeming intellectual environment. Among the works offering a general study of Mudimbe's work and trajectory, we can cite those by some contributors of this present volume: the special issue “Reading Mudimbe” in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* coordinated by Kai Kresse in 2005, *V.Y. Mudimbe: Undisciplined Africanism* by Pierre-Philippe Fraiture in 2013,¹⁹ and *The Mudimbe Reader* edited by Pierre-Philippe Fraiture and Daniel Orrells in 2016.

3. Reading and discussing Mudimbe in Kenya

Although it is not a central part of teaching at Kenyan universities, Mudimbe's work is known to a significant number of academics, in particular philosophers, who use it in their own works and teach it to their students. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Dismas Masolo in particular has contributed to the reception of Mudimbe in Kenya, most notably at the University of Nairobi. He did so especially through his university courses, his article “An Archaeology of African Knowledge. A Discussion of V.Y. Mudimbe” published in *Callaloo* in 1991, and his book *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, published in 1994,²⁰ as the chapters by Francis Owakah and Alex Nelungo Wanjala confirm. The structuring concepts elaborated in

16. This can be translated as *V.Y. Mudimbe or Discourse, Distance and Writing*.

17. This can be translated as *Africa in the Mirror of Literatures. Collected Works in Honour of V.Y. Mudimbe*.

18. This can be translated as *V.Y. Mudimbe and the Reinvention of Africa. Poetics and Politics of the Decolonisation of the Human Sciences*.

19. On the notion of “indiscipline” in Mudimbe's work, see also, in French, Mangeon (2008).

20. See in particular “V.Y. Mudimbe: An Archaeology of African Knowledge” (Masolo 2011, 178-93).

The Invention of Africa and *The Idea of Africa*, starting with the “invention” and “idea” of Africa, as well as “gnosis” and the “colonial library,” have been reappropriated and debated. They can also inspire criticisms of a way of thinking that is sometimes found to be too abstract, insufficiently anchored in local practice and theory, or not sufficiently attentive to the political potential of cultural belongings. Mudimbe’s extensive use of a European academic body of knowledge might also be viewed as an internal epistemic contradiction for a philosopher who calls for emancipation from the European *episteme*. This interpretation of Mudimbe in Kenya may have been influenced by a certain ethnophilosophical understanding of African philosophy, as embodied by John Samuel Mbiti, whose famous *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) has had an intellectual and even institutional influence in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi; or by Henry Odera Oruka’s proposition of “Sage Philosophy”²¹ (Odera Oruka 1990).

However, just as Mudimbe’s philosophical work, most of which was written in English, remains at a distance from French-speaking readers, his literary work, which is celebrated in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where he first trained in the literary circles he ran at the time²² (and where his books are considered “classics” and studied in the country’s schools²³), and which is also acclaimed by international critics, is still hard for English-speaking readers to gain access to, and is therefore still relatively unknown. These two restrictions on how Mudimbe is received betray an unfortunate compartmentalisation of academic knowledge on Africa—one that echoes the linguistic polarisation of African studies that was inherited from the colonial division of the continent, as well

21. Odera Oruka defined “Sage Philosophy” as such: “What is sage philosophy and how can one distinguish this from other forms of philosophy that are available in Africa? These other forms include professional philosophical texts (works of academics and students formally trained in philosophy), nationalist-ideological theories and ethnographical studies of traditional African beliefs labelled as “philosophy” (ethnophilosophy). Sage philosophy becomes a fourth trend in this list. [...] Sage philosophy consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between *popular wisdom* (well-known communal maxims, aphorisms and general commonsense truths) and *didactic wisdom* (an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community). While popular wisdom is often conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set-up and popular wisdom.” (Odera Oruka 1991, 33).

22. See Le Lay (2014, particularly chapter 1.4 “L’École littéraire de la Kasapa”, 54–63).

23. Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem underlines that in the DRC, Mudimbe’s name “is more alive than ever, in the world of the youth and at university (...), a name that people learn to know in school textbooks and encyclopedias of literature, a name that is quoted with pride (...).” (1996, 272, our translation)

as disciplinary divisions, and reveals the extent of the fragmentation of the field of African studies. In this respect, Mudimbe's work stands out as a fundamental point of reference for unifying and redefining African studies. It gives us a bridge between both French-speaking and English-speaking academic fields, but also between disciplines, not just philosophy and literature but also the humanities and social sciences, notably history and anthropology. It recognises Africa as a subject, with a method that is constructivist and critical of colonialism and of its epistemic and political effects, and with the aim of contributing to the epistemological liberation of African studies from what remains colonial within them.

In expressing an epistemological critique that could emancipate knowledge, Mudimbe can be compared to the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o,²⁴ who, from the same generation, published an essay in 1986 with the evocative title *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. It was with the idea of revisiting the works and influence of these two great thinkers on Africa that the research dissemination programme "Intellectuals from Africa and the diaspora: how African thought on Africa is being reinvented" (*Intellectuels d'Afrique et de la diaspora: comment se réinvente la pensée africaine sur l'Afrique*) was conceived, incorporating a cross-referenced, multi-sited perspective between Kenya and the DRC. Created within IFRA-Nairobi and with financial support from the Institut Français in Paris, the programme was developed in partnership with the Institut Français in Goma for the DRC component, and with the University of Nairobi's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies for the Kenya component. The aim was to encourage exchanges between academics and intellectuals, African and European, on the contribution, reception, and significance of the works of Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ for Africa in general, and in particular for the two countries concerned. A series of events was also organised, on Ngũgĩ in Goma in June 2019²⁵ and on Mudimbe in

24. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a Kenyan writer, born in 1938, now internationally recognised as a classic. In 1986, he published *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*, translated into French in 2011 under the title *Décoloniser l'esprit*. In this essay, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reflects on his experience as a writer, theatre-maker and academic in a recently decolonised country. He shares his awareness of the alienation experienced by Africans who have opted for the language of the coloniser as their official, national, or teaching language.

25. A round table on the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was organised at the Institut français in Goma on 12 June 2019, and a theatrical adaptation of Mark Twain's pamphlet *King Leopold's Soliloquy*—translated in French by Jean-Pierre Orban and directed by Patrick Zézé and Jean-Pierre Orban—performed there on 11 June 2019: https://f.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1864/files/2019/06/Autour-de-Ngugi_doc-de-comm-Goma_juin-2019.pdf. An interview with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o by Maëline Le Lay in Nairobi in March 2019 is available on Youtube: "Decolonizing the Mind with

Nairobi in December 2019, with the view of participating in the linguistic decompartmentalisation of their respective receptions.

Given the audiences for their works, the two thinkers are eminent representatives of the Kenyan and Congolese intellectual contexts: revisiting their works was relevant to a project that sought to increase awareness of these contexts on both sides of the territorial and linguistic borders. Mirroring Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ within the framework of an exchange between Kenya and the DRC also contributed to the same objective of reflecting on the decolonisation of thought (Kavwahirehi 2006) and “undiscipline” (Fraiture 2013), as the two thinkers are also authors. Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ share a questioning of the conditions of independence of thought in Africa, and thus of emancipation from colonial epistemic domination. What they also have in common is the heuristic richness of an intellectual enterprise combining literature (more so in the case of Ngũgĩ) and philosophy (more so in the case of Mudimbe), as well as a central reflection on the language of thought and writing—English and Gikuyu for Ngũgĩ, French and English for Mudimbe. Lastly, Mudimbe and Ngũgĩ are both bearers and defenders—each in their own way and with their own tools—of an emancipatory, pan-Africanist, democratic, socialist, and internationalist political project, rooted in a violent experience of resistance to neocolonial dictatorship: prison and exile for Ngũgĩ during the dictatorship of Daniel arap Moi, and exile for Mudimbe during that of Mobutu Sese Seko. In fact, being of the same generation (Ngũgĩ was born in 1938, Mudimbe in 1941), the two thinkers have witnessed common events and situations on the continent, from colonialism to the independence struggles, and from political independence to neocolonialism and the fight for real independence.

4. From the symposium to the book

Mudimbe’s problematisation of Euro-American and African academic cooperation as early as *Lodeur du père* was a guiding principle for conceiving and putting in place the “Intellectuals from Africa and the diaspora” programme in general, and for organising the symposium on Mudimbe in Nairobi in particular. This excerpt from the book (Mudimbe 2023 [1982], 82–84) sets forth in clear terms the main requirements—“creativity, an enduring spirit, and rigour”—put forward by Mudimbe to make fair

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o ” (Published online by IFRA Nairobi on 7 October 2019, 13’).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXq8AurffeQ>.

and reciprocal cooperation possible, against what remains of colonial asymmetry:

“What could cooperation between Euro-American and African universities mean? The answer is simple: in my opinion, what matters is that African universities find their own path. This path should respond to the needs of the evolution (I prefer ‘evolution’ to ‘development,’ because of the latter’s economico-rational implications; evolution implies only change, whatever it may be) and the authenticity (in the original sense of the term) of African societies. True interuniversity cooperation can occur only within this framework, and has three principal requirements: creativity, an enduring spirit, and rigor [...].²⁶

Based on these three requirements, any operational model of interuniversity cooperation between Africa and Euro-America should answer at least to the following conditions:

—In all fields affected by cooperation, the offer must respond and correspond to the demand. Up until today, as we know all too well, the demand has been conditioned by the offer, in keeping with the simple formula of difficult times: we settle for fish, because there is no more meat.

—Scientific and cultural demands must take priority over economic imperatives. This means the impact of ‘political tactics’ on the material chosen for cooperation must be limited as much as possible.

—Reciprocity must be the norm. In other words, there must really be cooperation: that is to say, exchange on all levels rather than ‘assistance,’ technical or otherwise.”

Although reciprocity was limited by the prior nature of the “Intellectuals from Africa and the diaspora” programme, the Mudimbe symposium

26. Mudimbe goes on to define these three requirements: “Creativity—but starting from the fundamental basis of African culture. As Joseph Ki-Zerbo puts it: “Culture is the most immediate and most important dimension of independence ... There is no conscious nation without national culture ... In the end, the African soul will dissolve if the elites of the continent continue to refuse their past, to fear immersion into the masses and preach cultural exodus ... For my part, I have no doubt: if African culture and history were to become the order and site according to which the present and future were thought in African universities, we would be able to substitute values that are more attentive to the real flourishing of humanity for the eminently castrating norm of immediate profitability at all costs, which so violently marks universities in Africa. / Enduring spirit—this is at once faith in the social, scientific, and spiritual mission of the university (“I will live; even if I must die, I will continue on”) and, through it, a critical openness to all possibilities. In sum, every university must think itself and its future in terms of its social and political possibilities, beginning with its essential mission—which is, as is sometimes forgotten, to train and produce true men and women of science. / Finally, rigor—a scientific rigor that is a serious exercise of “freedom,” a refusal of paths traced once and for all, a permanent questioning of what has been learned, and a dialectical overcoming of knowledge. But also a political rigor that is both a calm analysis of the social and economic structures that “condition” the university as a social organization, and a fervent but critical attention to its hopes and needs.” (Mudimbe 2023 [1982], 83)

was organised with philosophers from the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi. With the participants, including the foreigners supported by IFRA-Nairobi, in this symposium hosted by the University of Nairobi, as well as with the authors of the chapters of this volume—which we are honoured to co-publish with the East African publishing house *Twaweza Communications*—we have made a conscious effort to design with balance the scientific and editorial apparatus of this collective work on Mudimbe. This effort is now open to the reader’s criticism.

Centring cooperation between a French institution based in Kenya and a Kenyan institution on the work of Mudimbe—mirroring that of Ngũgĩ—, or, in other words, on a set of reflections on the origin and significance of asymmetries of all kinds (political, institutional, economic, social, epistemic, etc.) resulting from colonial oppression, and on the need to overcome them, is a way of responding to Ngũgĩ’s call for the decolonisation of thought, which also reflects Mudimbe’s position. This exhortation concerns not only African thinkers and institutions—as the contributions of the Kenyan philosophers and the symposium audience attest²⁷—but also—and absolutely—Western thinkers and institutions, including teaching and research institutions.

In a quotation from *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe uses the metaphor of the epistemic “cage” (Mudimbe 1988, 64) to describe the hold of sedimented ideas about Africa, from which it is necessary to free oneself. Are we here, in spite of ourselves, re-enacting the “trick” whose power Mudimbe denounces in *The Scent of the Father*? “(...) for Africa, to truly escape from the West presupposes an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from it; it presupposes knowing to what extent the West, perhaps insidiously, has drawn close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to think against the West, of all that remains Western; and a determination of the extent to which our recourse against it is still possibly one of the tricks it directs against us, while it waits for us, immobile and elsewhere” (Mudimbe 2023 [1982], xvi). We refuse to believe that the absence of relations between the regions of the world is the solution to the problem of asymmetry and a remedy for this trick. The symposium and this book bear witness to this. We have attempted to face the neocolonial problem in practice and in our field, by confronting its asymmetries of domination, and to extricate ourselves from the epistemic classificatory dichotomies that historically correspond to them. This

27. We would especially like to thank Garnette Oluoch-Olunya and Mohamed Bakari for their interventions.

decompartmentalisation has been achieved in terms of discipline, by combining philosophy and literature; in terms of language, by navigating from English to French back and forth; and in terms of participation, by bringing together contributors from Africa and Europe. Nothing has been completed yet in the effort to combat the fragmentation of the field of African studies and to liberate African studies epistemologically from what is still colonial in them, but studying the works of Mudimbe and other African thinkers like Ngũgĩ is making a contribution.

5. The chapters

This volume comprises chapters covering different dimensions of Mudimbe's work, but without any claim to exhaustiveness or agreement between them.²⁸ It is intended as a modest contribution to Mudimbe studies and their dissemination, and hence to the fields in which these studies take part, such as philosophy, literature, the social sciences, African studies, and postcolonial and decolonial studies.

The book opens with Francis Owakah's chapter, "Introducing V.Y. Mudimbe in East Africa: My Experience at the University of Nairobi," which plunges us into the introduction of Mudimbe's work in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi, where the author studied before becoming a professor of philosophy himself. Owakah's description of and reflection on the context in which Mudimbe's work was received reveal, in particular: the importance of Masolo for the introduction of Mudimbe into the Kenyan and wider East African philosophical and intellectual field; the importance of reading Mudimbe for two decisive openings, on the one hand to the human and social sciences, to the question of their articulation with philosophy and to the problem of their application in Africa, and on the other hand to contemporary French philosophy and hence to the fundamental problem for the unity of the field of African philosophy of the link between its Anglophone and Francophone expressions.

Kai Kresse's chapter, "Africanism and beyond? Re-reading Mudimbe in Context Today," extends this contextualisation by discussing the relevance of Mudimbe's critique of Africanism in relation to other African thinkers of his generation and as a reference point for a younger generation of intellectuals in African philosophy and African studies calling for radical epistemic changes. Highlighting Mudimbe's critical insight into the entanglement of Africanism in Eurocentrism and its intellectual and

28. These chapters have been reviewed by the three scientific editors of this book as well as by external reviewers chosen by the publisher.

political violent effects, Kresse shows that the philosopher elaborated erudite constructive ideas for overcoming Africanism, but not practical tools that could readily be applied. The author discusses this lack of a practical path to intellectual decolonisation by drawing from the work of three major African philosophers—Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, and Henry Odera Oruka—as well as by immersing the reader in classroom debates with his own students in African studies. In spite of this, Kresse argues, recent critical approaches are pushing Mudimbe’s emancipatory project further in new and inventive ways. Referring to Felwine Sarr’s book *Afrotopia*, Kresse sheds light on the clear goals and concrete tasks which an Afrophone and Africa-centred rewriting of the humanities and social sciences from Africa could turn to.

Alex Nelungo Wanjala’s chapter, “Interrogating an African *Gnosis* in the Analysis of Kenyan Literature,” takes us from philosophy to literature, applying the concept of *gnosis* to Kenyan literature in the search for an African *gnosis* there. Differentiating between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Grace Ogot, Wanjala wonders, with Spivak, whether African *gnosis* is more likely to be found in African writers who are not caught up in the “double take” characteristic of subaltern intellectuals. This chapter brings us face to face with the difficult Mudimbian concept of *gnosis*, also forces us to confront the Mudimbian problematisation of authenticity.

In Mudimbe’s work, this is inseparable from a problematisation of modernity, which Pierre-Philippe Fraiture addresses in an original way in his chapter, “V.Y. Mudimbe’s Modernities: Towards a Temporal and Spatial Excavation of (Neo)colonialism.” He examines the notion of modernity in a selection of Mudimbe’s works. Whilst loosely relying on the two cardinal concepts developed by Reinhart Koselleck—experience and expectation—, Fraiture sets out to explore (neo)colonial temporal politics and the factors behind the *modern* spatialisation of time in sub-Saharan Africa and the Congo in particular. Mudimbe’s work offers a diagnosis of colonialism and neocolonialism over the *longue durée* and can also be interpreted as an outright rejection of historical and ontological determinism. *Via* Michel de Certeau’s “walking rhetoric,” the first part analyses how Mudimbe appraises the spatio-temporal implications of the missionary evangelisation of the former colonised Congo. The second part focuses on Mudimbe’s attempts to come to terms with the legacies of Western modernity, challenge the epistemological violence of the Enlightenment, and question the basis of African neocolonialism. The final part of this chapter briefly assesses the role ascribed to African intellectual resources—and African philosophy—in Mudimbe’s ongoing critique of Western extroversion.

As we wanted to include a text by Mudimbe himself in this volume, we have chosen an extract from a relatively under-studied book by Mudimbe, now out of print, published in Montreal in 1994, *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres. Esquisse d'un jardin africain à la bénédictine*. It is both an intellectual autobiography and a sociohistorical essay about Mudimbe's "conversion"—religious, but also intellectual, subjective, and intimate—, which, as an "attempt at self-understanding, or better, self-acceptance of his present in the light of his childhood and past," is at the same time an "act of courage, lucidity, and historical and political awareness" (Kavwahirehi 1998, 124, our translation). The book provides very specific information on religious education and the monastery as alienating devices that frame and shape individuals from an early age. The story alternates between vivid descriptions of the transformation of the structural frameworks of everyday existence and more analytical passages showing a certain distance from emotions, without erasing affects such as bitterness or even sarcasm towards the domestication of bodies and minds. About this piece, Pierre Halen aptly notes that it "illustrates quite well the journey of a critic in search, less of knowledge about Africa, than of the conditions in which knowledge is sought about Africa and, necessarily, *for* Africa" (2014, 255, our translation). His autobiography shows how Mudimbe's religious education not only deeply shaped his mind but also influenced his philosophy. More precisely, this personal text reflects his existential conflict between criticism of institutionalised religion and a more individual, even intimate, experience of God. This tension is evident in his novels (whose titles betray it), as shown by Nadia Yala Kisukidi (2013). To our knowledge, this is the first time that an extract from *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres* has been translated into English, here by Emelyn Lih. It resonates in particular with Pierre-Philippe Fraiture's chapter and Maëline Le Lay's interview of Sammy Baloji, illustrating, in a language that blends intimacy and analytical distance, a colonial topography that orders places according to the principles of separation and hierarchy, and captures the effects of colonisation, particularly by missionary and Catholic, on African subjectivities—in this case, that of Mudimbe.

The copresence of literature and philosophy in Mudimbe's work makes the possibility of its artistic reception all the more obvious. Sammy Baloji willingly agreed to discuss and explain how his art may have been inspired by, or even derived from, Mudimbe's thinking. In the conversation between the artist and Maëline Le Lay, "Comparing Viewpoints to Depict the Stratified Memory of a Territory Forged by Colonial Policy," reflections on the politics of building and planning in the colonial cities—in this case

Elisabethville, the copper capital, which would become Lubumbashi, in the mining province of Katanga, the home region of Baloji and Mudimbe—are intertwined. The discussions also address the way the artist portrays the memory of this place, and questions the ties of continuity or rupture from one era to the next. Baloji repeatedly reminds us how much reading Mudimbe echoes his creative research. He finds his own artistic technique of collage, montage, and juxtaposition in the philosopher’s method of comparing very different documents and sources on the same subject. In the interview, the artist offers a political and historical interpretation of the city of Lubumbashi in the light of Mudimbe’s thought. Using maps, it shows how, during the colonial era, urban planning was used to domesticate and convert culture, and how the areas where Europeans and Congolese lived and were kept separate from each other were designed and organised. Like the extract from *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres*, the interview is published in the original French, to convey the meaning of the conversation as accurately as possible, and in English to make it available to English-speaking readers.

The texts by Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, V.Y. Mudimbe, Sammy Baloji, and Maëline Le Lay bring to light an important aspect of Mudimbe’s thinking, whose archaeological method might lead one to believe in the primacy of temporality and history: for him, these are inseparable from spatiality and geography.²⁹ This explains why, in order to think Africa and its history, Mudimbe needed a different logic from that of the modern philosophies of history, which are excessively based on temporality. Salim Abdelmadjid’s chapter, “Africa and Dialectics: Reading V.Y. Mudimbe Towards a Concept of Africa,” can be read in relation to this idea. In line with Mudimbe’s position of Africa as a subject of thought, and with this book’s proposition to think Africa with Mudimbe, Abdelmadjid proposes to read Mudimbe’s work in light of the question “What is Africa?” and with a view to a philosophical concept of Africa. In particular, he explains how Mudimbe helps to problematise both the unity of Africa—the justification of which is a priority condition for a concept of Africa—and—this is the meaning of the expression “Africa and dialectics”—the logic and method necessary to think this unity.

29. See the conclusion of *The Invention of Africa*: “The Geography of a Discourse” (Mudimbe 1988, 187–200).

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