



Africa Beyond Inventions

Essays in Honour of V.Y. Mudimbe

Edited by
Zubairu Wai

palgrave
macmillan

Africa Beyond Inventions

Zubairu Wai
Editor

Africa Beyond Inventions

Essays in Honour of V.Y. Mudimbe

palgrave
macmillan

Editor

Zubairu Wai

University of Toronto

Toronto, ON, Canada

ISBN 978-3-031-57119-0

ISBN 978-3-031-57120-6 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-57120-6>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: © V.Y. Mudimbe

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

*For V.Υ. Mudimbe:
Philosopher and friend*

*There stood god-like Plato, who erst in Athens revealed the secret paths of
heaven-thought virtues.*

—WR Paton, *The Greek Anthology*

FOREWORD

This volume of essays in honour of V.Y. Mudimbe is a much-anticipated conversation, a welcomed contribution, and a reminder that decolonial awareness cannot afford to ignore Mudimbe's work in the field of African Studies. From 25 to 28 October 2023, the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA) held its 5th Biannual Conference in Lubumbashi under the theme, 'Repatriating Africa: Old Challenges, Critical Insights'. As president of the ASAA, I was pleased that a good number of papers and panels built around the politics of knowledge production in African studies engaged the question of what Africa is and offered new insights into reading Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*. This tribute to Mudimbe will have the merit of not only raising his spirits but also vindicating the argument that African studies cannot expect to serve Africa and keep Mudimbe's work in a marginal status.

Mudimbe's thorough, in-depth, and colossal investigation on colonialism and its survival techniques, embodied in the colonial library as a colonising and epistemic structure, paradoxically, has yet to be fully acknowledged and incorporated in the disciplines. *Africa Beyond Inventions* brings this to the attention of scholars in the field of African studies and postcolonial theories to avoid marginalising further such critical thinkers like Mudimbe. It is important that we acknowledge how these essays already thrust Mudimbe's thought and methodology to the fore of the debates in African Studies today and the status of knowledge production on and about Africa. This volume will certainly bridge this gap

in generations and geographies of knowledge production on and about Africa.

This is a powerful homage of a younger generation of African/ist scholars to a mentor, a friend, a colleague, and a trailblazer who worked tirelessly to emancipate knowledge on/about Africa from the straitjacket of the colonial library (Matthews, Wai, Fraiture, Kolia, this volume). Mudimbe has, indeed, dedicated his life to unravel distorted colonial images of Africa and decipher the Eurocentric epistemological traditions from which these images stem. He has interrogated this colonial library, that is, the written texts, constructed narratives, repeated representations, accumulated knowledges, canonised discourses, established attitudes, epistemic orthodoxies, and official histories of Africa that were produced for colonial consumption. There is no way the debates on Africa's coloniality, decolonial, and postcolonial knowledge production can be complete when eschewing to engage Mudimbe's work.

This foreword uses anecdotes to clear the way. The first, a recollection of my recent trip through Likasi, the place of birth of Mudimbe, aligns well with Gervais Yamb's 'postcolonial event' and Donatien Cicura's phenomenological discussion of Mudimbe's novels. Has Mudimbe been appropriated at home? The second anecdote relates to Mudimbe's personal library in tune with Sally Matthews's suggestion to develop more confidence in engaging Eurocentric epistemologies and the colonial library. Finally, the third anecdote touches on notions of transcendence, religion, and theology in line with Kasereka Kavwaherehi's contribution to this volume. But first, how do such theoretical debates practically relate to or affect our everyday life in Africa?

LIKASI : THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

I was driving to Kambove, a small mining town lying some 25 kilometres north of Likasi when it dawned on me that Africa's current reality is not much different from that of the colonial days. Africa still experiences a lot of brain drain, 'political' exile, overexploitation of resources and the people by foreign multinational companies, and the ensuing pauperisation of the masses that results from a system that 'left' but never died. Even more than sixty years after independence, Africa is still supplying cobalt, lithium, copper, coltan, uranium, gold, and so forth to Western countries. Not much of that colonial reality has improved. On the contrary. It took

only a few years after independence for Mudimbe to realise that independence, like a political hoax, did not preclude the social and economic drift of Africa. Hence, Mudimbe's multifarious role and intellectual ambition to link knowledge production with socioeconomic development, as Pierre-Philippe Fraiture contends in this volume.

An interesting gap which these authors set out to address can be summarised in Lazarus' puzzle, reprised by Wai's question. How can one explain the contrast between this towering giant in African studies and the 'modest status' he occupies in postcolonial studies and decolonial perspectives and other such disciplinary traditions? Mudimbe is, indeed, one of Africa's greatest intellectuals alive. A prolific writer, a critical thinker, and a symbol of resistance who debunks the colonial library as the site of Western epistemic violence, this book not only addresses the question of why such an important producer of critical knowledge has been marginalised in the decolonial debates and postcolonial studies but also vindicates Mudimbe's critical lucidity, erudition, and depth in approaching such debates. His monumental scholarship should emulate academic truth seekers in academia, the arts, or politics.

Did I say monumental? I had stopped my car as I entered the city of Likasi—the birthplace of Mudimbe—contemplating a number of questions. What has changed since 1941 when Mudimbe came to this world here? Phenomenologically (Cicura, this volume), and if he were to visit his hometown today, what's left of his emotional attachment to his place of birth? Perhaps what Sally Matthews says of Souleymane Bachir Diagne could also apply here, a 'refusal to be pushed into a corner in which he can only speak as an African'! To me, the city looked pathetic. I mentally considered its demographic growth in the last sixty years. I imagined the banality of the every day and the anonymity in which it is sunk. I fathomed the enduring and obdurate poverty in contrast with the number of tracks siphoning off, daily, the abundant natural resources of the region. I watched a few newly superimposed architectural expansions adjoining the old decrepit colonial buildings. In today's global economy, African spaces and subjects are still reduced to mere objects of study and instruments of capitalist production. World powers are still racing for what's left of the continent's strategic minerals, and the toll on human life is unspeakable.

Competition among technologically advanced economies and progress in the high-tech industry, explicitly or implicitly, continue to assign the roles to be played in these international relations to non-European

geographies, especially in Africa and Latin America, at the expense of local communities, the environment, and climate.

The relevance of Mudimbe's work consists in his effort to make explicit what lies hidden in the representations. His genius, so to speak, is beyond the political and economic dimensions of coloniality, in discerning the enduring importance of its (colonial) epistemic dimension (Matthews). This brings to mind what François Dosse (2003) wrote on Michel de Certeau and the writing of history, that 'there is no existence of the present without the presence of the past [...] In the life of time, the past is certainly the heaviest presence, and so, possibly the richest. It is that presence which, in any case, is necessary to both feed on and distinguish oneself from' (p. 145–156).

Scholars in this volume ascribe to Mudimbe just the same mission, as he 'feeds on and distinguishes himself from' the colonial library. His analyses of the 'geography of discourse' and Western epistemologies can also help explain why Likasi, like other African cities, has remained a colonial script. It spreads out in the daylight, more than six decades after independence, almost like what Aimé Césaire, one of Negritude's founding fathers, describes in his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*:

5. ... *this town sprawled—flat, toppled from its common sense, inert, winded under its geometric weight of an eternally renewed cross, indocile to its fate, mute, vexed no matter what, incapable of growing according to the juice of this earth, encumbered, clipped, reduced, in breach of its fauna and flora.*

6. ... And in this inert town, this squalling throng so astonishingly detoured from its cry like this town from its movement, from its meaning, not even worried, detoured from its true cry, the only cry one would have wanted to hear *because it alone feels at home in this town*; because one feels that it inhabits some deep refuge of shadow and of pride, in this inert town, this throng detoured from its cry of hunger, of poverty, of revolt, of hatred, this throng so strangely chattering and mute. (2013: 3; my emphasis)

In Likasi, has anyone ever thought Mudimbe's childhood home could become a museum, like the Martin Luther King Jr. Center which I once visited in Atlanta, Georgia, or the Frank Lloyd Wright's home and studio in Oak Park, Illinois? Does a local community even exist to preserve his contribution in fighting to overcome leftover vestiges (or downright plain continuation) of colonialism? Illustrious men and women are often

memorialised in this way so that the next generations can learn about history, but also to preserve such exceptional human beings as moral, intellectual, or social progress markers. To do so, however, a community must understand both the importance of memory and the value of the contribution to society made by the person to be memorialised.

BEYOND *THE INVENTION OF AFRICA*

Some ten years ago, I went to visit V.Y. Mudimbe in Durham, North Carolina. One afternoon, as he finished giving me a tour of his impressive library, I abruptly told him of my desire to take him back to the Congo. In reaction, he told me, ‘Another father, Godé Iwélé [an Oblate priest and longtime friend of his], had also suggested the same’. He concluded by saying that he would love that. What I really had in mind beyond the possibility of a physical visit was how to enshrine Mudimbe as a national hero. He has not only created extraordinary universal value through production of knowledge but also he has attached respect and honour to the name of the Congo. For, indeed, every time the Congo is mentioned in international media, the name is attached to a crisis, catastrophe, or negative event. Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe once remarked that the reason why Westerners continue to paint Africa in a harsh light is because it makes their action or inaction much easier to justify. In other words, why bother with Africa? It’s a place where nothing works and nothing will ever work (interview with Katie Bacon, 2000). With this in mind, I meant to say that associating the name Mudimbe with the Congo is in itself a revocation of those negative tropes. As such, he deserves a national place of honour in academic curricula and the collective awareness of his persona embodies the very contradiction to the colonial library that seeks to perpetuate a negative image of Africa.

I evoked the transfer of his private library to the DRC after his retirement, for instance, as a place to start. This way, Mudimbean scholars would be forced to travel to the DRC to continue their research. He referred me to Kasereka Kavwaherehi with whom he had already had the same conversation. Beyond a symbolic recognition that many believe he deserves, the true merit of *Africa Beyond Inventions: Essays in Honour of V.Y. Mudimbe* is that it brings Mudimbe closer to home. These essays do a good job that simultaneously engage Mudimbe’s ideas and confront

them with current scholarship on Africa's coloniality, decolonial and post-colonial studies, but at the same time they unpack, simplify, and make accessible some of Mudimbe's erudite writings.

I had once mentioned to Mudimbe that my students, both in the US and in Africa, find *The Invention of Africa* hard to read. In his defence, he told me, 'But I wrote it for my undergraduate students'. Could this difficulty in reading Mudimbe also be a response to the puzzle raised by many authors in *Africa Beyond Inventions*? Reading Mudimbe requires rigour and self-discipline. One needs to have prior research credentials. At the time of my visit to Durham, Mudimbe told me that Cameroonian filmmaker, Jean Pierre Bekolo had just left. His film project, '*Les Choses et les mots de Mudimbe*', sought to avail Mudimbe to a wider audience. Yet, once in a while, there are few doctoral students who come for residence at his place to consult his library, he said. Previously, he had lamented the decreasing interest among scholars in learning Latin. He was wondering who will be there to decipher all this important knowledge buried in a fourteenth-century collection of Latin Encyclopaedia he showed me in his library.

Mudimbe has always thought of himself as an educator, a teacher, and nothing more. His home is indeed a shrine, a temple of knowledge. I must admit how overwhelmed I felt surrounded by such erudition. I thought of his house as the forest of initiation in some African cultures, where the ancestral spirits are hovering in trees and their branches, just like the books around this library. As if he had guessed my thought, he asked me to reach out to one particular book. It was Pierre Legendre's *Le Tour du Monde des Concepts* which was lying close to where I sat. He asked me to get a photograph of his, which he had used as a bookmark. I contemplated the picture. He had a stern look. Lost in thought. Dressed in black. What does it tell you? He inquired. As my reply delayed, he answered himself. 'Once a monk, always a monk'.

WHY DID YOU LEAVE THE MONASTERY THEN?

Back in Chicago in 2013, V.Y. Mudimbe stayed with us at the Loyola University Chicago Jesuit community. One time, as I prepared to leave him alone to go celebrate mass for the students, he offered to come along. Of course! I was delighted. On our way to the chapel, I asked him what his being agnostic really implied. It is a methodological posture to allow exhausting the questions of God, the world, and transcendence,

he replied. Then he warned me that he would just sit in the back of the Church and read his breviary. He told me he had remained faithful to reciting his breviary from the time he was in the monastery. It is a question of discipline, he said. Fast forward. After contemplating the photograph in his office, I asked him why then had he left the monastery? He told me this story.

At a Christmas celebration when monks were celebrating together, he was given the community bulletin in which brothers tell the stories about their life and work to inform their benefactors back home. V.Y. went through the bulletin and was not pleased with the style and representations of Africans in one text. He asked the brother in charge to correct the expression. As the brother refused, he insisted that either the expression was replaced or he would leave the convent. As the brother believed this to be a blackmail, he challenged the young Mudimbe to leave the monastery. The following day, he had packed his little stuff and went to catch the plane in Bujumbura, where he bumped into the Abbot at the airport, returning from holidays in Belgium. Surprised, the Abbot asked Mudimbe to turn back with him and they would settle the matter. But Mudimbe told him it was too late. Twice, in the years to come, while he was a student at Lovanium in Kinshasa, a delegation of monks would come to try to reason with him to change his mind but to no avail.

Many years later, he would tell me, 'Once a monk, always a monk'. He kept the routine of waking up very early, and he told me his alarm plays Gregorian music in those wee hours, as he starts to work. He remembered how he was once mistaken for a priest, at the airport in Madrid, where a woman in a health emergency situation needed a blessing. Obviously, Mudimbe's Catholic faith was relegated to the private intimacy realm while living in the public sphere as an agnostic, that is, someone who questions and seeks understanding. As a critical observer, and a thinker, he refused a priori support to religion which was also performed as a political instrument (Kavwaherehi, this volume). Obviously, it is this intellectual coherence that fascinates in Mudimbe. In fact, living his human vocation as an intellectual, a researcher, a mentor, an educator, and a teacher has been more a refusal to compromise with banality. Leaving the monastery because of one derogatory expression in a bulletin that shows disrespect to Africans, yet remaining attached to a monk's lifestyle, suggests that Mudimbe was committed to the transcendence and sacredness of life and never veered from this position. He told his audience in Chicago in 2013 that he had been wearing only black clothes for the

last ten years to express his protest against and mourning about inflicted violence and death in his country of origin, the DRC.

CONCLUSION

The Congolese people were elated recently when UNESCO enlisted the *Rumba* music as a world cultural heritage. Following this event, the house of the late Papa Wemba, a Congolese Rumba singer, was purchased by the government and transformed into a public museum. These events come to mind because, as said earlier, Mudimbe's contribution to straightening negative perceptions about the Congo, in the first place, but also in emancipating the image of Africa and African beings can neither go unnoticed nor be trumped by the entertainment industry. Like Fraiture's (p. 42) hint, Zaïre went through its cultural golden age in the midst of rising dictatorship that sent Mudimbe into exile. Such paradoxes are the ones scholarship should expose. And if, as Wai laments, Mudimbe's 'towering stature in African studies [still] contrasts the "modest status" he occupies in postcolonial studies, and ... decolonial perspectives and other such disciplinary traditions', this volume successfully attempts to reverse the trend. *Africa Beyond Inventions* inaugurates a confident discourse that challenges the colonial library and undermines it from within. It is an important addition to the ongoing decolonial debates. There is no better way to honour a master except by adding oil to keep his light burning and putting it on the lampstand.

Lubumbashi, DRC
6 January 2024

Toussaint Kafarhire Murhula, S.J.

REFERENCES

- Bacon, K., 'An African Voice,' *The Atlantic*. August 2000 Issue. Available online at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/08/an-african-voice/306020/>
- Césaire, A. (2013). [*The Original 1939*] *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Translated and edited by A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Dosse, F. (2003). 'Michel de Certeau et l'Écriture de l'Histoire', *Vingtième Siècle Revue de l'Histoire* 2 (78): 145–156.

PREFACE

This book is a collection of essays on the work of philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe. It results from the ‘Thinking Mudimbe’ colloquium which was held virtually on 21 April 2022. The colloquium had brought together a group of scholars, specialists in their own right, to honour the intellectual legacy of one of Africa’s and the world’s most brilliant thinkers and engage a critical conversation on ways of relating to his work and the challenge it poses for Africanist knowledge. A remarkably brilliant and powerfully erudite thinker, Mudimbe has for several decades advanced a distinctive critical project that engages the complicated relationships between Africa and colonial modernity, the discursivity of the modern disciplines, and how they encounter and construct Africa as an object of knowledge and imperialistic vocations, as well as the epistemic and methodological challenge they pose for disciplinary preoccupation with the continent. Speaking primarily to the African condition, though not limited to it, Mudimbe’s expansive body of work covers considerable intellectual terrain—in fields such as philosophy, anthropology, theology, postcolonial studies, decolonial theory, literary criticism, cultural studies, prose fiction, and African studies more broadly. As well, it presents a serious challenge to the modern disciplines and their discursivity, offers conceptual and methodological lessons for Africanist knowledge, and invites us to rethink the way we produce knowledge about the continent.

The colloquium tasked us with engaging, in different registers, various aspects of Mudimbe’s remarkable body of work and the concerns that

have animated a lifetime of intellectual labour. This ranges from questions about the discursivity of the modern disciplines and how they encounter, reproduce, and translate Africa into their conquering epistemic frames, the nature and condition of Africanist knowledge, the archival and discursive configurations of colonial representational schemas and their implications for African identity, culture, and subjectivity, the predicament of gnostic attempts at disengaging Africanist knowledge from the colonising imprints of its Eurocentric epistemic regions of emergence, and the postcolonial condition and transcendence of colonialist sociopolitical and cultural formations for Africa's rejuvenation.

Taking up these questions beyond the colloquium, the volume attempts to map the contours of the complicated terrain of Mudimbe's vast and expansive body of work and advance a critical engagement with different strands of his thought in order to grapple with the concerns that for decades fired his intellectual energies. In the expansive spirit of his work and the capacious grounds it covers, the chapters of this volume respond to the challenges posed by Mudimbe's oeuvre by engaging and qualifying dispositions regarding manners of relating to it, the multiple and complicated terrains it covers, and what this means for the possibility of disciplinary knowledge about Africa not codified by the matrices of its colonising epistemic and discursive schemas. Through these preoccupations, the volume honours the singularity of Mudimbe's contributions to various bodies of scholarship and advances a productive engagement with his thought. Organised in five overall—three substantive—sections, the chapters in this volume are presented in a way that complements each other. Though written as standalone essays, they succeed each other in critically mapping Mudimbe's complex thought through a critical appreciation that illuminates various strands of it. The result is an impressive assemblage of essays that not only gives the book organisational coherence and interpretive consistency and cadence, but also offers a comprehensive overview of Mudimbe's work.

The 'overture' or opening section contains a single chapter—'Resurrecting Mudimbe'—that serves as an introduction, of sorts, to the volume. In this chapter, author Zubairu Wai draws on his relationship with Mudimbe, his intimate familiarity with his work, and the conversations that they have had over the years, to initiate a conversation on ways of relating to it. The chapter suggests that a major preoccupation of Mudimbe's intellectual vocation has been about finding himself—an allegory for Africa—in an 'archive' that erases him or reduces him to a

mere object of colonial ideological gazes, that is, constructs him in the mode of absolute otherness as a being for others. This preoccupation, which essentially defines Mudimbe's intellectual vocation and the issues that arise therefrom can, the chapter suggests, be approached from the interrelated conceptual registers of 'invention', 'gnosis', and 'the colonial library', which anchor Mudimbe's stimulating exploration of the invention and idea of Africa as constituted in the archives of colonial modernity and its implications for African gnosis and the present-day conceptions and realities of the continent and its people.

Engaging these concepts, the chapter gives an account of Mudimbe's intellectual vocation, engages his account of the nature and conditions of Africanist knowledge, and the methodological strategies he has proposed for inscribing and affirming the pertinence of African voices in the social and human disciplines. The chapter proceeds from reflections on questions about intellectual filiations and Mudimbe's importance for discourses about manners of inscriptions in disciplinary spaces, to painting a portrait of a complex thinker, in order to understand his background and the influences that led him to the concerns that have animated a lifetime of intellectual work. Furthermore, it considers ways of reading him conceptually and apprehending the methodological lessons his work offers for Africanist knowledge. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the possibility of moving beyond him. Through these preoccupations, the chapter helps to contextualise the volume and pre-figure the issues it addresses.

The following (first substantive) section, 'Discourse of Otherness', contains three chapters that take up a major preoccupation of VY, namely, the issue of colonial difference and African alterity. In different registers, they trace Mudimbe's account of the historical and epistemic shifts that shaped changing notions of colonial difference, African otherness, and notions of the human since the expansion of Europe in the fifteenth century and beyond. Among the chapters, a complex image of Mudimbe's historiography, archaeology, and genealogical method emerges as he traces the epistemic and discursive shifts that underwrite changing notions of Otherness, the human, and Africanity in the context of colonial modernity.

In the lead chapter of this section—'Mudimbe's *Homo Absconditus*: Towards a Resurrection of the Human'—one of the most perceptive essays in the volume, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture presents an elegant and effulgent exploration of Mudimbe's account of colonial modernity,

African alterity, and more specifically, notions of the human. Attentive to his complex conceptual and methodological instructions, Fraiture shows how, since the 1960s, the notion of the ‘human’—‘man’, ‘anthropos’, ‘muntu’, and its sub-human opposites: the pagan, the savage, the ‘docile’ body, and so forth—has been crucial to Mudimbe’s exploration of colonial modernity and the human sciences and the ways they have contributed to the invention of Africa and its people. From his early writings onwards, following Fraiture further, Mudimbe has conducted a systematic exploration and critique of humanism to account for Africa’s material, political, and epistemological dependence on the West as well as envisage routes to its ‘resurrection’. Organised in parts, the chapter first examines Mudimbe’s use of a set of analytical models to excavate the discursive orders that guided the construction of Africans as ‘objects’ of knowledge, then engages Mudimbe’s relationship with and partial dissatisfaction with structuralist anthropology before considering his attempts to blur the divides between the philosophical and the autobiographical in order to propose methodological strategies on ways of transcending the limitations of structuralism and the colonising matrices of Africanist knowledge.

In the following chapter—‘Aesthetic Theologies of Resemblance, the Production of Colonial Difference, and Possibilities of Ethical Translation’—Zahir Kolia takes up the issue of the production of colonial difference through an examination of Mudimbe’s aesthetic theories of resemblance and difference. Like Fraiture, Kolia pays close attention to Mudimbe’s complex conceptual and methodological lessons, in order to trace his account of the production and shifting notions of colonial difference and African alterity. This critical aesthetic method, Kolia maintains, concerns the way the colonial power/knowledge nexus produces, objectifies, reifies, and explains ‘Africa’ and its people through colonial representational schemas and discursive frames. While the typical approach to the examination of knowledge of otherness often begins with difference based on the assumption that Africa has always been invented and framed through discourses of radical otherness, Mudimbe, Kolia rightly observes, does subvert this by beginning not with difference and otherness, but with resemblance or similitude based on sacred mediaeval Christian theocentric epistemologies and aesthetics. To illustrate this, Kolia explores by foregrounding Mudimbe’s critical aesthetic method to show how resemblance eventually articulates distinctions, separations, and classifications through a series of European aesthetic forms.

Considering Mudimbe's apprehension of theologically grounded forms of dealing with cultural difference, in the form of resemblance in German artist Hans Burgkmair's 1508 painting, 'Exotic Tribe', (a series of paintings to illustrate Bartolomäus Springer's book on overseas travels) and Peter Paul Rubens' 1620 the 'Study of Four Black's Heads', among others, Kolia argues that this demonstrates that radical difference vis-a-vis Africa was not a transhistorical phenomenon, but emerged through a series of epistemic and discursive shifts from theologically grounded forms of resemblances, to the emergence of theories of diversification of beings, classificatory tables, and taxonomies that would shape forms of human and cultural difference grounded upon a new epistemological order, and the emergence of radical difference in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that would strategically articulate savagery and primitiveness and firmly attach it to Africa. Kolia ends by engaging Mudimbe's thought around the concern of dissolving imposed colonial discourses vis-a-vis Africa and its people, and the possibilities of ethical translation. Between the chapters by Kolia and Fraiture, an elegant picture of Mudimbe's historical philosophy and its accounting for colonial difference and African alterity becomes clear.

In the third and final chapter of the section—'Notions of Africinity'—Olusanya Osha engages Mudimbe's exploration of different notions of Africinity within a variety of historical domains. Though a philosopher *par excellence*, Osha maintains, a transdisciplinary vision stands revealed in Mudimbe's work and this tension between transdisciplinarity and philosophical tendencies becomes a productive site that endows his project with an uncommon energy, textuality, and tonality. Following Mudimbe as he navigates and transverses many contested 'ideas' of Africa across space and time, as mediated by many factors and different ideologies, paradigms, cultures, and civilisations, Osha contends that what emerges in Mudimbe's exploration are different genealogies of the idea of Africa enmeshed in these various epochs from Greek and Roman antiquity, through the Christian Dark Ages, the Renaissance reimagining of otherness to European imperialism, Atlantic slavery, the age of Enlightenment and nineteenth-century colonisation. Thus, rather than dwelling on a single idea, Osha notes of Mudimbe's work, what emerges is a contested notion of Africinity and multiple ideas of Africa.

This chapter thus complements quite well, those of Fraiture and Kolia. Together, they constitute important scholarly testimonies on Mudimbe's project and how to relate to it. Related to each other not only

in terms of substance but also in terms of attentiveness to Mudimbe's historical philosophy, critical archaeology, and genealogical methods, they constitute useful ways of apprehending his methodological teachings for Africanist knowledge and how to read and apprehend his exploration of modernity, changing notions of the human, colonial difference, and African alterity. They also link to the following section, 'Reading the Post-colonial' which extends these discussions further, especially around the issue of the nature and conditions of possibility of Africanist knowledge, the contaminating vectors of the colonial library, and the possibility of decolonising Africanist knowledge and political life, and the anguish that comes not only in living in this space but also about its transcendence. Comprising four chapters, the section complicates Mudimbe's thought regarding the postcolonial condition and its predicaments (Karina), the intransigence of the colonial archive (Matthews), and Mudimbe's attempts at disengaging Africanist knowledge from its colonial epistemic sagas and transforming colonialist social formations, what Yamb calls, 'deconstructing the postcolonial event', and the crisis of identity of the African intellectual brought about by the palimpsestic inscriptions of colonial modernity and its cultural and identitarian effects (Cicura).

The lead chapter of this section—'Refusing to Vanish: Despair, Contingency, and the African Political'—by Alírio Karina is one of the most innovative essays in this volume. It offers a fascinating theoretical and historico-political account of Mudimbe's reading of the postcolonial African condition by foregrounding a critical exegesis of his two signature texts, *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994). To Karina, what animates these texts is the anguish of the post-independence condition of political and epistemic despair. This notion of despair, they argue, emanates from the desire for a non-Western claim to knowledge and African life defined by epistemic, political, and economic autonomy, and the seeming failures, if not impossibilities, of bringing these into being. Working through Mudimbe's method and account of African history of ideas, Karina retraces his analysis of African political thought in the wake of Négritude and Black personality, paying specific attention to his conception of identity and critique of representation in order to draw out a subtextual response to questions of historicity, political commitment, and the role of intellectual thought in Black counter-discursive responses. Paying specific focus on the concept of 'absolute discourse', a concept that they claim reveals a theory of

speech, inhabitation, and contingency critically aligned with postcolonial Marxist demands for authenticity, sovereignty, and authority, Karina argues that Mudimbe constitutes a theory of politics and contingency amidst apparent and real epistemic and material closures. The significance of this intervention which partially resides in its innovative reading of Mudimbe's epistemic scepticism and vigilance is that it apprehends his real-life concern or 'despair' about the failures of post-independence politics in overcoming colonialist social formations and epistemic systems and gestures towards ways of bringing alternatives afoot.

The chapter of Gervais Yamb—'Decolonizing Knowledge in Africa: Mudimbe's Philosophical Deconstruction of the Postcolonial Event'—considers the transcendence of this colonising condition through what he calls 'deconstruction of the postcolonial event'. There is, he argues, an explicit strategy for 'decolonising' knowledge in Mudimbe's work, which takes the form of a philosophical investigation, a preoccupation that unfolds in a triadic formula—construction, deconstruction, reconstruction. Designating a unique process that relies on three indissociable, inseparable, and interdependent activities, namely colonisation-decolonisation-postcolonisation, this formula, Yamb contends, is at the heart of Mudimbe's transgressive approach to colonial modernity. At stake, following Yamb further is a 'writing in the making', that is, a coming afoot of a philosophical enterprise of 'the postcolonial event', understood as 'an existential situation rooted in colonial, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist struggles, as well as legacies of Western philosophy that shaped this specific context'.

The question that animates this chapter, thus pertains to the way Mudimbe articulates, from an epistemological and philosophical standpoint, this postcolonial event. Taking the form of thematic and conceptual circularity, the finality of this postcolonial event, Yamb insists, is a critical and prospective reinvention of a new philosophical framework in and for Africa. In this essay, we have a philosopher (Yamb) reading a philosopher (Mudimbe) and situating him in a dual context: Mudimbe, Yamb insists, is both an African (Congolese) philosopher and a French philosopher. As well, linking him with deconstruction and decolonisation offers an interesting take on Mudimbe, especially for the moment now characterised as a decolonial turn in the social and human disciplines and the seeming tensions that exist between deconstruction and decolonisation/decoloniality.

Writing from South Africa, Sally Matthews in ‘Recreating Knowledge about Africa in the Shadow of the Colonial Library’, takes up a historical question of the transcendence of colonial knowledge regimes and quests for decolonising Africanist knowledge, which she points out has gained renewed attention due to student protests in favour of decolonising university curricula in South Africa and the broader scholarly discussion in what is now characterised as a decolonial turn. Taking up Mudimbe’s concept of the ‘colonial library’ and the challenge it poses for such decolonisationist quests, Matthews probes the condition of possibility of producing knowledge about Africa differently in the light of the colonial library which, as Mudimbe suggests, not only burdens the continent with centuries of perverse Eurocentric tropes and representational schemas, but also affects gnostic attempt at disengaging Africanist knowledge from its colonial epistemic regions of emergence. Following Mudimbe’s reading of the legacy of Edward Blyden, Matthews suggests that Blyden’s example gestures toward the possibility of producing knowledge about Africa in a way that refutes or counters the colonial library even while acknowledging that such knowledge will not fully escape the constraints of the library. Building on this idea, Matthews engages the work of a number of African theorists—Gaurav Desai, Siba Grovogui, and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, among others—to explore the possibility of pushing beyond the constraints of the library in creative and productive ways. In doing this, she brings Mudimbe in conversation with these theorists and pushes his thought around the question of the intransigence of the colonial library into a new and productive direction.

The final chapter of the section—‘The Danse of Plato and Mudimbe, or the Relationship between Plato’s Epistemology and Mudimbe’s Phenomenology’—by Donatien Cicura, reads Mudimbe’s novels as grounded in a serious phenomenological description of the Congolese intellectual, and a deep hermeneutics of the African encounter with Europe. A close reading of Mudimbe’s work reveals, Cicura argues, that the idealisation of the African past has no real foundation but rather is a mythology in the negative sense Aristotle gave this word. Rather, they should assume the new ‘hybrid’ identities emergent from the colonial encounter. Counter the negative connotation of inauthenticity ascribed to it, hybridity for Mudimbe, following Cicura further, is the locus of new beginnings, a new identity that looks forward to a world where it can make its own imprints, hence a condition for creativity. Staging a parley between Plato’s epistemology which he deciphers as defined by

essentialisms that ground true knowledge in eternal essences believed to be unchanging, and Mudimbe's phenomenology that acknowledges the limit of human knowledge, locates change and motion at the centre of philosophical investigation, and ultimately grounds meaning and knowledge in the lived experiences of human beings, Cicura reads Mudimbe's novels as phenomenological.

He suggests that the limitations of traditional studies on Africa that Mudimbe rejects operate from a Platonic, essentialist perspective with rigid categories that cannot capture the dynamism of African societies, and the crisis of the 'divided' African intellectuals who are split between the pull of two cultural milieus. What Mudimbe's novels show, Cicura contends, is that true epistemology is founded on phenomenology, and that any legitimate hermeneutics of African societies must therefore begin with a phenomenology of Africanity. By reading his novels as phenomenological and in putting him in conversation with Plato, Cicura gestures to a point that Fraiture has made in a different register: Mudimbe has the singular ability to unite and transgress a disparate body of knowledge systems, theoretical traditions, and writing practices—for Fraiture, Mudimbe has the ability to blur the lines between philosophical essays and the autobiographical; for Cicura it is between the philosophical and prose fiction.

Cicura's chapter constitutes a bridge between the preceding section and the succeeding 'Sites of Inscriptions'. The chapters of this section engage Mudimbe's work in different sites and registers—prose fiction, feminist theory, theology, and political science/security studies. Collectively, they show the versatility and capaciousness of Mudimbe's thought, which applies and can be applied to illuminate different areas of social reality and disciplinary fields. Like Cicura, the opening chapter of the section, 'The Elusive Mudimbe: A Feminist Journey through his Novels', by Gertrude Mianda, one of Mudimbe's 'intellectual daughters' (2014: 188), engages Mudimbe's novels, but in a different register. Mianda eschews reading Mudimbe's novels the way they are usually read: in terms of the colonial encounter and the antimonic tensions between modernity and tradition emergent from that encounter. Rather, she brings a feminist gaze to bear, reading them through a feminist lens. This exposes an angle of Mudimbe's thought that tends to escape critical attention and hence has thus far received little attention.

There is however a risk in labelling Mudimbe a feminist since, aware of the treacherousness of labels, he, Mianda maintains, rejects attempts

as labelling him. As well, following Mianda further, there is no self-conscious attempt on his part to describe himself as a feminist. Despite this risk, Mianda insists, a close reading of Mudimbe's novels reveals a feminist stance that demands recognizing him as a thinker 'whose literary work has made a valuable contribution to the critical understanding of African women's situation and, through them, of Africa'. Drawing on his philosophical essays, Mianda complicates the reading of Mudimbe's novels, their descriptions of gendered social relations, their attention to heteronormativity, and their understanding of sexuality. Reading Mudimbe with a feminist lens enables the foregrounding of new insights that explore not only his focus on and thought about African women's situation, and the issues of gender relations and sexuality in Africa, but also sheds light on the expansive and multi-faceted character of his complex, yet elusive, thought 'that highlights the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality in Africa'.

'Religion and Theology as Cultural and Political Performance', the chapter by Kasereka Kavwareheri, takes up a theme that holds a significant place in Mudimbe's intellectual work: religion, and more specifically, Christianity. Since religion structures the practice of everyday life of many Africans, and Mudimbe himself grew up in a religious milieu, Kasereka points out, the questioning of the meaning and the decentring of the God signs as it is lived in Africa constitutes and remains, for Mudimbe, a project of self-hermeneutics and understanding of the cultural and sociopolitical becoming of Africa since its encounter with the Christian West. Christianity, more importantly, Catholicism, is both an important element of Mudimbe's own founding experience, having been raised in a Catholic seminary, and is linked, through Christian missionary sagas in the context of colonisation and adaptation theology in the post-independence era in Central Africa, to the development of African gnosis and philosophy. As such, the attention it receives in Mudimbe's philosophical works also has important methodological and analytical implications. From his agnostic perspective and the background of a reflexive thought, Mudimbe, following Kasereka further, explores these motifs, and reads them as political and cultural performative practices. Dwelling especially on *Parables and Fables* (1991) and *Tales of Faith* (1997), Kasereka engages Mudimbe's account of theological and missiological discourses, which he characterises as the primary historical and sociological founding events that grounded a politics of conversion. As well, he considers the implications of Mudimbe's characterisation of

Christian missionary discourse as political performance and religious experience and its theological expression as cultural practices. Kasereka also shows how, in the context of anti-colonial and post-independence nationalism the claims of the right to cultural difference that animated the African theology of incarnation and the birth of syncretic churches, the concept of God turns out to be not so transparent.

In ‘Securitisation and the “Weak States” Concept: A Mudimbean Analysis’, the third and final chapter of this section, Tinashe Jakwa considers the importance of Mudimbe for political science and security studies, especially for the failed state discourse and the concept of securitisation. She suggests that incipient forms of securitisation theory—in the form of colonial and missionary discourses and the reproduction of Africa as a security challenge—can be found in Mudimbe’s seminal *The Invention of Africa*. Reading Mudimbe alongside Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, among others, Jakwa demonstrates the African roots of securitisation theory as an international relations analytical framework. Through this reading, Jakwa provides an analysis of that not only links contemporary discourses of ‘state fragility’, or ‘state failure’ to colonial securitising discursive practices, but also undermines the developmental trajectories of African societies. The strategic securitising functions that the ‘weak/fragile state’ concept performs, she concludes, function to configure relations between different sets of actors in the maintenance of the coloniality of global hierarchies and power imbalances.

In the ‘finale’, an afterword concludes the book. Written in an epistolary form—‘Letter to V.Y. Mudimbe; On the Euromorphic Practice of Critique’—it draws on an intimate understanding of his work to propose a robust response to his critics around four intersecting registers—*que faire*, or the instrumental question; the requirement of fieldwork as methodological requirement for truth claims in African studies; manners of inscriptions in disciplinary spaces; and what is characterised as Euro-morphism. The afterword both dismisses the profound inability of critics to come to terms with the complexities of Mudimbe’s ideas and clarifies his positions against often limiting criticisms advanced by his critics. A selected bibliography of Mudimbe’s work is included.

Resulting from a virtual colloquium, this book not only celebrates the towering intellectual achievements of Mudimbe, but also provides a comprehensive engagement with his thought. We hope that this effort of centring Mudimbe and engaging his work will clarify his thought and make it accessible to a new generation of readers. I am very grateful

to the colleagues and friends—Donatien Cicura, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, Tinashe Jakwa, Alírio Karina, Kasereka Kavwahirehi, Zahir Kolia, Sally Matthews, Gertrude Mianda, Sanya Osha, and Gervais Désiré Yamb—for honouring the call and contributing their time and expertise to advancing this conversation on one of Africa’s most brilliant and significant thinkers. Thank you for your generosity and forbearance, without which, this volume would not have been possible. Kasereka Kavwareheri and Zahir Kolia deserve special thanks for their contributions to this volume beyond their individual chapters. Kasereka helped with the conception of this project and the direction it would take. In addition to contributing a chapter, Zahir read the entire manuscript and offered valuable comments on the overall organisation of the volume. Always available when called upon, I am grateful for his support and friendship. The support of Anca Pusca, senior executive editor at Palgrave Macmillan, is here acknowledged. Her support and enthusiasm for the project are the reasons this publication is possible. Two anonymous reviewers provided valuable comments that helped shape this volume.

To my family, for their love and support: to Sabrina for her forbearance and encouragement, and to our son Marcus, for teaching me patience and how to balance the absurdities of career pressures with family responsibilities within a limited economy of time. Finally, to V.Y. Mudimbe, for the remarkable human being and thinker he is. None of this would be possible without him. VY is the most generous, and unassuming intellectual of comparable standing. Through a chance encounter at a York University bus stop in Toronto many years ago, I was introduced to his work, which I found to be the most stimulating way of coming to terms with the historicity of colonial modernity and the discursivity of the modern disciplines, especially in relation to African. Naturally, he became the conceptual and methodological anchor of my doctoral dissertation. After my defence, for which he served as external examiner, I won his friendship. His generosity and humility are indeed awe-inspiring and humbling. No email or phone call ever went unanswered. VY wrote the foreword to my *Epistemologies of African Conflicts*. He would read and comment on my drafted papers, offer advice on career and life decisions; conversely, he would seek my advice on professional and personal issues; extend me invitations to conferences; introduce, and/or recommend me to colleagues; and so forth. Indeed, most of the contributors to this volume are friends and colleagues I met through VY. I would type and edit his papers, which he would dictate to me over the phone, giving

a rare glimpse into how he works. My relationship with him had reached a point that at conferences colleagues started referring teasingly to me as ‘V.Y. Mudimbe’s son’. VY has taught me a lot, especially on how to be an intellectual. Words cannot express my gratitude for his scholarship, friendship, generosity, mentorship, support, and encouragement over the years. In his debt, I will forever be.

A version of Chapter 1 was previously published as ‘Resurrecting Mudimbe’ in *International Politics Reviews* 8, no. 1 (2020): 57–76. I am grateful to Springer Nature and Palgrave Macmillan, and Robbie Shilliam, the editor of *International Politics Reviews* for permission to reproduce it in this book. A version of Chapter 2, ‘Mudimbe’s Homo Absconditus: towards a Resurrection of the Human’ was previously published in the *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 15, nos. 3 & 4 (2013): 455–475. Thanks to Intellect and Kamal Sahli, the Editor of the IJFS for permission to reproduce the essay in this book. A version of Alírio Karina’s chapter ‘Refusing to Vanish: Despair, Contingency, and the African Political’ was previously published in *diacritics* 49, no. 4 (2021): 76–99. It is reprinted with the permission of Johns Hopkins University Press.

Toronto, Ontario, Canada
31 December 2023

Zubairu Wai

CONTENTS

I Overture

- 1 Resurrecting Mudimbe 3
Zubairu Wai

II Discourse Of Otherness

- 2 Mudimbe's *Homo Absconditus*: Towards
a Resurrection of the Human 37
Pierre-Philippe Fraiture

- 3 Aesthetic Theologies of Resemblance, the Production
of Colonial Difference, and Possibilities of Ethical
Translation 65
Zahir Kolia

- 4 Notions of Africanity 89
Sanya Osha

III Reading The Postcolonial

- 5 Refusing to Vanish: Despair, Contingency,
and the African Political 121
Alfrio Karina

6	Decolonizing Knowledge in Africa: Mudimbe's Philosophical Deconstruction of the Postcolonial Event	151
	Gervais Désiré Yamb	
7	Recreating Knowledge About Africa in the Shadow of the Colonial Library	171
	Sally Matthews	
8	The Dance of Plato and V.Y. Mudimbe, or the Relationship Between Plato's Epistemology and Mudimbe's Phenomenology	193
	Donatien M. Cicura	
IV	Sites Of Inscriptions	
9	The Elusive Mudimbe: A Feminist Journey Through His Novels	217
	Gertrude Mianda	
10	Religion and Theology as Cultural and Political Performance	243
	Kasereka Kavwahirehi	
11	Securitisation and the 'Weak States' Concept: A Mudimbean Analysis	269
	Tinashe Jakwa	
V	Finale	
12	Afterword: Letter to VY Mudimbe: On the Euromorphic Practice of Critique	297
	Zubairu Wai	
	Appendix: V.Y. Mudimbe: A Bibliography	323
	Index	333

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Donatien M. Cicura is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Georgia Gwinnett College. His research focuses on Philosophy of History, African philosophy, Sub-Saharan African Identity, Philosophy of law, the influence of religion on war and peace, and the metamorphoses of religious language in the postmodern age.

Pierre-Philippe Fraiture is Professor of French Studies at the University of Warwick (UK), where he teaches postcolonial literatures. He is a member of the European Council-funded project ‘Philosophy and Genre: Creating a Textual Basis for African Philosophy’ (2020–25). His most recent publications include *Unfinished Histories: Empire and Post-colonial Resonance in Central Africa and Belgium* (Leuven UP, ed., 2022), *Past Imperfect: Time and African Decolonization, 1945–1960* (Liverpool UP, 2021), *The Mudimbe Reader* (Virginia UP, ed. with Daniel Orrells, 2016), and *V.Y. Mudimbe: Undisciplined Africanism* (Liverpool UP, 2013). He is currently writing his next monograph, *DRC Extractivism across the Arts and Literature: Excavating the Past, Envisioning the Future*, a book focusing on figures such as Sammy Baloji, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, and Sinzo Aanza.

Tinashe Jakwa is Provost Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Global Development Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Western Australia.

Alírio Karina's research examines the historical and political transformations and consequences of anthropological thought, and its relationship to sedimenting conceptions of blackness, indigeneity, and Africanity. They hold a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Princeton African Humanities Colloquium, are Associate Faculty at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, and are Organiser of Mimbres School for the Humanities. Karina is co-editor of a special issue of *Social Dynamics*, 'After the Fire: Loss, Archive, and African Studies' (2024), which examines archival loss and destruction and its consequences for thinking African Studies. They have published in the journals *Diacritics*, *Third Text*, *Postmodern Culture*, and *Safundi*.

Kasereka Kavwahirehi is Professor of Francophone Literature at the University of Ottawa, Canada. He is the author of *V.Y. Mudimbe et la ré-invention de l'Afrique. Poétique et politique de la décolonisation des sciences humaines* (2006), *Politiques de la critique: Essai sur les limites et la réinvention de la critique francophone* (2021), and most recently, of *Les leviers de l'émancipation. Education, culture et démocratie en Afrique* (2024), among others. He is also co-editor (with V.Y. Mudimbe) of *Encyclopaedia of African Religions and Philosophy* (2021) and (with Grant Farred and Leonhard Praeg) of *Violence In/And the Great Lakes: The Thought of V-Y Mudimbe and Beyond* (2014), and most recently. His research focuses on Francophone literature, African philosophy, and Postcolonial theories.

Zahir Kolia is Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology at the Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada. His research focuses on the historical questions of colonial modernity and its contemporary postcolonial afterlives through Postcolonial and Decolonial approaches, Critical Race Theory, Indigenous and Post-Secular approaches. Specifically, it examines how Indigenous and racialised communities have been organised under settler colonial and secular forms of neoliberal governmentality, as well as how sovereign power and attendant juridical forms of state and violence are historically inscribed and organised by race, coloniality, and the theological-political valences of colonial modernity.

Sally Matthews is Associate Professor in the Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes University, South Africa. Her research interests include development studies (specifically post-development theory and the role of NGOs), African Studies (specifically