REVIEWS


Valentin Y. Mudimbe's The Invention of Africa is a landmark achievement in African studies. It is not about African systems of thought as such, but the forms of knowledge which represent them, including scholarly discourse on African religion. The book examines the foundations of African philosophy as constructed by the West within the history of Africanist discourse, and appropriated by African critics and scholars throughout the continent. The study is historically grounded, philosophically dazzling, and theoretically quite radical, providing the Africanist equivalent of Edward Said's Orientalism. But unlike Said, Mudimbe also examines how the Other writes back by including African scholars who have worked within the limits of imposed languages and epistemological frames. For this monumental accomplishment, Mudimbe received the 1989 Herskovits Award.

Mudimbe's study traces a grand genealogy from Herodotus, through Western history, to missionary rhetoric, anthropology, and contemporary developments in African theology and philosophy. Mudimbe follows Foucault's "archeological" method of excavating the implicit knowledge/power relations of evangelical paradigms, colonial sciences, anthropological taxonomies, black nationalist discourses and African philosophical debates. Each of the five major chapters is packed with bibliographic commentary and critical exegesis that bring together work in English, French, German and Italian—a humbling reminder to many Anglophone readers that much valuable material remains untranslated from other European (and former colonial) languages. Within this cornucopia of interpretive traditions, a number of powerful theses emerge.

Mudimbe's major thesis identifies African philosophy as gnosis, signifying methods of inquiry and knowing which emphasize a "higher and esoteric knowledge ... under specific procedures for its use as well as transmission" (p. ix). Anyone familiar with the
"deep", restricted, indeed secret nature of African cosmological knowledge—what Griaule called "la parole claire" in opposition to the "paroles de face" of public dogma—will concur with this formulation. But gnosis for Mudimbe is a duplex sign (i.e. it fuses semantic and pragmatic functions), anchoring the form and content of "traditional" African philosophies within those Western discourses which purport to represent them. Gnosis is as much the product of Africanist discourses as the object of their inquiry, and it is the images, inventions, and "translations" of African alterity by the West which command Mudimbe's critical attention. Of the African worlds portrayed by Western scholarship, Mudimbe asks: "Is not this reality distorted in the expression of African modalities in non-African languages? Is it not inverted, modified by anthropological and philosophical categories used by specialists in dominant discourses?" (p. 186). This critique is not limited to Western scholars, but extends to African intellectuals who remain unwitting heirs to a colonial "philosophy of conquest" (p. 69).

Secondary themes trace the impact of the civilizing mission—the powerful marriage of Christianity and colonialism—on more recent ideologies of African otherness, including modern anthropology and the Negritude movement. Thus the third chapter, on "The Power of Speech", discloses the missionary logics of conversion, salvation, indigenization and incarnation within the work of Levy-Bruhl, Tempels, Griaule and Evans-Pritchard, and dialectically transposed by Sartre, Senghor, Diop and others into visions of an essentialized Africa. Myths of Negritude and African Personality are further explored in chapter four, while chapter five exorcises Tempels' ethnophilosophical ghost in debates about local rationalities, African Christianity, philosophy and culture. We are left with a rigorous negative critique, placing "la chose du texte" (p. 183) of African gnosticism beyond Western forms of representation and understanding. On this final issue I am more sanguine, and would urge greater sensitivity to the critical dimensions of African cosmologies and hermeneutical traditions, not in an invented "pristine" condition, but as practised in ritual, world religions, philosophy and everyday life. For example, African Christians like Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther may epitomize indoctrinated missionary converts, as Mudimbe (p. 49) demonstrates, but their texts also belie deeper readings which reinvest Christian rhetoric with indigenous values and demands for African autonomy. These unof-