

V. Y. Mudimbe and the invention of Africa (and Latin America): which ways for Pan-Africanism (and Latin-Americanism) today? ¹

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Abstract: This essay presents some brief reflections on knowledge production in Africa and suggests some possible connections with the same problem in Latin America. This will be done in dialogue with the works of Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, one of the most important thinkers of the periphery. To deal with this issue, we must think about African and black identities, and Mudimbe is essential for that. He is one of the main critics of the essentialism present in the construction of the notions of “black” and “Africa”. He points out that they are inventions, and are produced mainly from outside. “Black” is an invention of the “white”, the “European”, the “western”, such as “Africa” or “East”, negatively constructed for the self-affirmation of a superior identity. These reflections can help to think about the invention of Latin American identity in parallel.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism; Latin Americanism; V.Y. Mudimbe; regional identities.

V. Y. Mudimbe e a invenção da África (e da América Latina): quais os caminhos para o pan-africanismo (e o latino-americanismo) hoje?

Resumo: Este ensaio apresenta algumas breves reflexões sobre a produção de conhecimentos na África e sugere algumas possíveis conexões com o mesmo problema na América Latina. Isso será feito em diálogo com as obras de Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, um dos mais importantes pensadores da periferia. Para lidar com esse tema, devemos pensar nas identidades africanas e negras, e Mudimbe é essencial para isso. Ele é um dos principais críticos do essencialismo presente na construção das noções de “negro” e “África”. Ele destaca que são invenções, e são produzidas principalmente de fora. “Negro” é uma invenção do “branco”, do “europeu”, do “ocidental”, como “África” ou “Oriente”, construído negativamente para a autoafirmação de uma identidade superior. Estas reflexões podem ajudar a pensar em paralelo a invenção da identidade latino-americana.

Palavras-chave: Pan-Africanismo; Latino-Americanismo; V.Y. Mudimbe; identidades regionais.

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Introduction

This essay presents some brief reflections about “Africa and the production of knowledges at the globalization era” (theme of the international conference for which it was originally prepared) and suggests some possible connections with the same problem in Latin America. This will be done in dialogue with the works of the Congolese academic Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, one of the more important thinkers of the global periphery. To deal with this theme, we must think about African and Black identities, and Mudimbe is essential to do that. He is one of the main critics of the essentialism present in the construction of the notions of “black” and “Africa”. He highlights that they are inventions and they are produced mainly from outside. “Black” is an invention of the “White”, the “European”, the “Western”, like “Africa” or “Orient”, built negatively for the self-assertion of a superior identity. At the same time, he produces some of the more interesting reflections about the ways for an epistemic decolonialization of Africa (Ngoie Tshibambe, 2017).

From this perspective, it is questionable whether there would still be place for (non-essentialized and progressive) supranational conceptions of “*Négritude*”, “Afrocentricity”, “African Personality”, “Ubuntu”, or “Pan-Africanism” today – in some sense, reproductions of a Philosophy of the Otherness. I discuss this problem particularly through the concept of *Négritude*, that in some sense is a “counter-mythology”³ originally inspired by myths and the Western influence on its creators. Finally, as an author who defines himself as a “Latin American” and a “Latin Americanist” (in the academic and political sense), I suggest that this reflection may contribute to thinking about the viability of a Latin American identity today. The concept of Latin America is also an invention, a disputed concept, implying ideological elements. “Orient”, “Africa” and “Latin America” can be analyzed with the same orientation – and the reflections of Edward Said, Mudimbe and the authors of decoloniality are important contributions in this direction. Particularly, Mudimbe is the precursor while being contemporary with relevant debates on the geopolitics of knowledge and the urgency of epistemic decolonization. Thus, he is of the lineage of

³ As suggested by Albert Memmi in his classical book *Portrait du colonisé précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (1957).

Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Amílcar Cabral, and he came first and thus preceded the discussions on these latter issues in Latin America.

So, first we will briefly discuss the Mudimbe's notion of "gnosis". After this, we will make some reflections about possible contemporary uses of the concept of *Négritude*, and finally we will argue if this can be relevant for the comprehension of Latin American identity today. It is important to think about the viability of a Latin American Thought, or we can deal simply with thoughts produced by Latin Americans – as we can differentiate African Knowledge from knowledges by Africans.

1 Mudimbe and African gnosis

This search for identity clearly marks the intellectuality of Africa and Latin America from the beginning. It is our intellectual dilemma, the intellectual dilemma of the peripheries between being as the center or being as ourselves, as Eduardo Devés (2017) observes. In this way, the uses and disputes around these concepts are crossed by scientific-philosophical reflections and by ideology. So, the notion of "gnosis" used by Mudimbe assumes a greater relevance and applicability than the author suggested in his classical book *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (1988). Just as one can speak of an "African gnosis, that is, both the scientific and ideological discourse on Africa" (p. 187), we can refer to, for example, a Latin American gnosis. Probably, the idea of gnosis in Mudimbe has similitudes with the notion of *pensamiento*, *pensée* – recurrently used in Latin American Studies to nominate the intellectual reflections of the region. Nor *doxa*, nor *croyance*.

This African gnosis "is sometimes African by virtue of its authors and promoters, but which extends to a Western epistemological territory" (p. 186). It is more Western because it is thought from Western categories (philosophical, anthropological), and in non-African languages. Would this have to be overcome by an epistemological shift? Mudimbe wonders: "Is it possible to consider this shift outside of the very epistemological field which makes my question both possible and thinkable?" In short, a classic problem of intellectual production in the periphery. Mudimbe notes that

we are dealing with ideology. Modern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West. What is more, since most African leaders and thinkers have received a Western education, their thought is at the crossroads of Western epistemological filiation and African ethnocentrism. Moreover,

many concepts and categories underpinning this ethnocentrism are inventions of the West. When prominent leaders such as [Léopold] Senghor or [Julius] Nyerere propose to synthesize liberalism and socialism, idealism, and materialism, they know that they are transplanting Western intellectual manicheism (p. 185)

Then, Mudimbe suggests that the only way to approach the problem is as a challenge, but at the same time as a promise. This African gnosis, and the very anthropology that is at its core, must be understood from its conditions of existence. To this end, Mudimbe proposes a permanent reassessment of the frontiers of anthropology so that it effectively contributes to a knowledge about the human being – and to a historicizing approach.

Such a strategy could approximate us carefully and progressively from a greater knowledge of *la chose du texte*, the African gnosis itself. It is a rich, complex, and creative strategy, for the plurality of approaches the author appropriates, recreating them. It is more interesting than the Hegelian dialectical proposition present in Jean-Paul Sartre's approach to *Négritude* in *Orphée Noir* (1948) and in Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), who understood *Négritude* as the antithesis, the “anti-racist racism” that would give rise to a superior synthesis. Mudimbe's approach is a safe scientific strategy, but one that does not solve the following problem for the analyst: these political identities, these scientific and ideological discourses that are intended to be understood and overcome, are still alive, strongly alive. And in certain contexts, they assume clearly progressive, even revolutionary meanings. This is not the problem of our author, we cannot wait that Mudimbe solve this problem, his preoccupation is not to solve the question if the African gnosis is “true” or if is a “falsification”: his mainly question is to show the meanings of this production.

We can always hope to overcome them by more universal, cosmopolitical and humanistic approaches. I agree with Mudimbe when he says in the conference “*En nombre de la similitude*” [“In the name of the similitude”] that “With competitive orders of difference in the interdependent political economies, which we still inhabit today, a basic common sense is still the most decent and reasonable bet, despite its precariousness” (2013, loc 2332); and that “alterity” and “difference”, as well as the theories they inspire, in some sense have become a “business”. But in despite of this, the Pan-Africanisms, Latin-Americanisms, *Négritudes*, *Latinités* and *Indigenismos* go on and on, like words and things, like myths and realities. We continue to think in binarisms as autochthonous/cosmopolitan, East/West, black/white, because they still

refer to things, very concrete things, like oppressions, dominations, colonialities, racisms. So, identities produced as a reaction to that (like *Négritude*) are very concrete too, even in the following sense: if we believe in something (that a “black essence” exists, for example), it is as if it existed in fact. But not only in that sense. Let us look at the issue of *Négritude* today to exemplify this point.

2 The problem of *Négritude*

Between the metaphysical, the biological, the psychological, the cultural, the historical, the social, the creators of *Négritude* endeavored to justify the thesis of black unity in its past, present and future. As Mudimbe resumes,

if they believed in affirming their difference, it was, according to him [Senghor himself], because of anthropologists and Black Americans. Also, in the period between the two wars they were privileged witnesses of the crisis of Western values. Moreover, their recent discovery of Marx gave them reasons for utopian dreams. Senghor’s explanation is plausible. Up to the 1960s, anthropology, Black American ideology, and Marxism had a significant impact on the African intelligentsia (1988, p. 88).

Particularly, the debt of the *Négritude* and this generation with the called Ethnophilosophy and with all the “colonial library”⁴ (*bibliothèque coloniale*) is notable, particularly with Father Placide Tempels’s *La Philosophie Bantoue* (1945).

Considering all the criticisms that the idea of *Négritude* has received in the last decades, it is questionable if there would be room for it in the 21st century. First, it should be emphasized that “black” and “Africa” are inventions, produced from the outside – as expounded by Said, Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe and others. In this way, any notion of *Négritude* based on essentialisms of any kind is something belonging only to the world of myth. Like Mudimbe says in the article “*Quam Metuendus Est Locus Iste*” [How Awe-Inspiring This Place Is],

the notion of a Black Personality, and your variations (“Africanity”, *Négritude*, etc.) as it occurs with every notion of identity, would like to be intended in its extremely dynamic intricacy. When identity politics succumbs to essentialism, it denies the obvious, the intricate process of constant

⁴ “Exploiting travellers’ 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” (Mudimbe, 1994, p. xii).

transformation, and promotes a form of cultural blindness; that is, an objective mechanism that impoverishes the resonant angles of our self-perception, and that also neutralizes the complexity of the set of relationships with everything, including one's own history (2013, loc 3870)

Among all the essentialisms, obviously the most nefarious is the explicitly supplied by physical, biological bases. The first step then is to get rid of biology in any Senghorian version. Less negatives are the cultural or metaphysical-spiritual essentialisms – which, in truth, have always prevailed, and have been increasingly emphasized by the authors of *Négritude*. Even better if we go particularly with Aimé Césaire and his emphasis on the historical heritage of oppression (coloniality and slavery) as a basis for black identity. However, there is no scientific basis for understanding these traits of culture, religiosity, or worldview as “inherent” – only as dynamical creations as Mudimbe suggests.

Thus, originally racially based notions such as *Négritude* and the various strands of Pan-Africanism or Pan-Negrism – as demonstrated by Kwame Appiah in his book *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992) – should not be understood racially or ethnically, at best as political choices of identity, to be conveniently activated. Black identity may constitute a socially constructed identity, as a response to racism – that is generated by “white” or “European” identity as a form of domination. A political identity and an anti-racist identity no longer based on the notion of race but in a common past, an economic-social heritage that would allow us to think of an equally shared future – as proposed by Aimé Césaire in his *Discours sur la Négritude* in 1987. Pan-Africanism in general is not a fantasy, it has a material basis: the legacy of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, the diaspora, and the racism constructed from the beginning to sustain them and present in capitalist modernity, that was built in function of this legacy and absolutely dependent on it. So, *Négritude* has a material basis, and is also a founding myth, a creation, an invention, a counter-mythology.

The notion of *Négritude*, and the peripheral thought in general, are products of meetings between Western concepts and ideas originated at the periphery – this one in general produced from Western categories and also from the poetical and scientific languages of the West. It explicit the hybrid character, that Du Boisian “double consciousness” experienced by the authors of *Négritude*, who sought to solve this dilemma by a return to the roots, to the particularities, but in the explicit intention of integrating the black from its particularities to some kind of universalism in process of

incorporation – *la Civilisation de l'Universal* [The Civilization of the Universal] proposed by Senghor.

Returning to the question of the future of the concept of *Négritude*, I consider that it can be relevant if it is stripped of essentialisms, assuming itself as a construction and a political option, as an identity to be (re)activated without exclusion of other identities in the diasporic universe – in the “Black Atlantic” proposed by Paul Gilroy (1993) –, a universe of “multiple and hybrid identities” – in the sense of Stuart Hall (2015). It may be relevant as: 1) a response to a still powerful racism, which cannot be answered merely with abstract values allegedly “universalists”, precisely the partial “universalism” produced by Eurocentric modernity; and 2) a transnational, complementary or alternative formulation to nationalisms of all kinds.

As for the first reason, if there is racism – and there is no reason why it should disappear in the near future, since it is a constituent element of capitalist modernity – the most effective response to it must be the valorization and non-essentialist dignification of the black and African history, as well as the preservation of the memory of slavery and colonialism. In Brazil or in USA this “screams” today. There is no way to overcome racism by claiming that races do not exist, so racism will disappear at the instant of widespread acceptance of this premise. Races do not exist, is a fact, but there are cultures, heritages, memories, socioeconomic inequalities, diaspora, and slavery.

As for the second reason, *Négritude* and Pan-Africanism still have much to contribute to the construction and maintenance of new diasporic identities, exchanges, institutions, and movements, and particularly in the efforts around African integration spaces and the Black Diaspora network movements in Latin America and Caribbean. They can collaborate in reactivating transnational identities that at least could counterbalance local and national identities.

3 From Africa to Latin America: the Mudimbe’s legacy

Inspired by this debate, it is possible to reflect about the concept of “Latin America”, the possibilities of a Latin American identity and of an effective Latin American episteme today. The term “Latin America” was first used by Latin Americans in 1856. The majority offered the primacy to the Chilean Francisco Bilbao in a speech given in Paris. Bilbao used the term when it referred to the “Saxon”, “Latin” and “indigenous” Americas. Also, in 1856, the Colombian poet José María Torres Caicedo

used the term referring to a “race of Latin America” as opposed to a “Saxon race”. That same year, the Colombian politician Justo Arosemena referred to “Latin America” and “Latin American interests” in speeches and articles. The term already appeared as a form of contraposition to the North, the Anglo-Saxons, and the USA – from a cultural, racial, religious, civilizational approach. At the same time, the term was used with other intentions, by the Second French Empire, of Louis Napoleon, as a way of legitimizing its “Latin” pretensions of influence over the Latin part of America. This use of the concept by the French refers us to another version about its emergence, which would have been reported in the French politician Michel Chevalier as early as 1836.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of Latin America has acquired a greater resonance – in the South and in the North, since in the USA also the notion of Latin America started to circulate more and more between politicians and scholars. A landmark of this moment is José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* in 1900. In the mid-twentieth century, it underwent a considerable semantic transformation by gradually aggregating economic and social significance, largely from the works of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, or CEPAL in the Spanish acronym), of the Latin American Marxism, the militant leftist groups, the dependency theorists, and the philosophical and religious progressive currents like the Philosophy and Theology of Liberation. Now, Latin America, in addition to a pretentious or effective civilizational, cultural, racial, or spiritual heritage, has begun to express a relative place in the world: “(neo)colonial”, “underdeveloped”, “dependent”, “peripheral”, “third World”, “Global South”. A place structurally interconnected and diametrically opposed to that occupied by the neighbor of the north, that should be fought.

Invented either from the North or the South, the concept is in any way hybrid, peripheral, constructed from an identity opposition, of a racial spirit in the beginning. It has always been used to differentiate two opposed or complimentary poles: Anglo-Saxon and Latin (north and south). The Anglo-Saxon/north pole in the northern analyzes and for the most analysts in the South was understood as positive, superior. But from the outset there was already a counter-hegemonic use of the concept, as early as Edward Wilmot Blyden’s African Personality (probably the founder of a modern African identity). This use expressed the spiritual, holistic, human, Christian, communal characteristics of the Southern American as opposed to the coldness, atheism,

individualism, artificialism, consumerism of the Northern American. It is worth mentioning that the reflection of José Vasconcelos's *La Raza Cósmica* [The Cosmic Race] in 1925 presents many common points with Senghor. So, hegemonically the idea of the Latin (American) is a negative pole in a binarism, but comparatively it is less negative than black/African. The Latin is not precisely Western, is a *mestizo*, an "hybridization", but it is on the border of the west, being able to be inside or outside of it depending on the analysis and the context. This is not the same thing with the African. In some sense, The Latin American is like a Caribbean *créole*, a *métisse*.

Like Pan-Africanism, *Négritude*, Pan-Negrism, Afrocentricity, it is questionable whether the idea of Latin America can be useful today. Gerónimo de Sierra (2008) responds positively to this question, since these countries are in the same geographic region; are mostly heirs of Iberian and Catholic colonization; speak nearby languages; present considerable groups of black, indigenous and *mestizo* populations; and most important, they are dependent societies of the central economies, presenting peripheral capitalism. It can then be considered that the idea of Latin America is an invention, but it also has concreteness. These objective and subjective elements must be recognized, to avoid both an essentialist approach to the region and its fragmentation and negation that could be negative to the recognition and development of the region. And this could be negative also to the production and recognition of Latin American knowledges.

Conclusion

This essay recognizes the urgent need to defend and rethink humanism and universalism from counter-hegemonic and multicentric approaches. With Mudimbe, I agree that identities like the African or the Latin American are basically based in "colonial libraries" and in essentialisms. But I do suggest that this critical effort may be complementary to the recognition that partial and regional identities are concrete, can be sometimes progressive and revolutionary, and we will not be able to get rid of them in the near future. We can try to make of them partial enlargements in the long process of higher, more cosmopolitan inventions. This will be neither Western (ethnocentric, liberal) cosmopolitanism, nor the Marxist final synthesis, nor Senghor's "Civilization of the Universal" (*Civilisation de l'Universel*). What will it be?

Mudimbe proposes to defend and rethink humanism and universalism through counter-hegemonic and multicentric approaches. Beyond ethnocentric and liberal

Western cosmopolitanism, Mudimbe is a thinker whose contribution to contemporary debates on the geopolitics of knowledge must be recognized. Mudimbe and others (like the decolonial thinkers) insists that there is no global thought, that all thought is partial, provincialized – both those from the “centre” and those from the “periphery”. It turns out that the former imposed themselves globally. It is necessary to make the thought of the periphery more visible, so that a global dialogue of knowledge can effectively take place. To this aim, regional identities (and the claim of an African Thought and a Latin American Thought in all its rights) can still contribute, symbolically, economically, politically. The connections, dialogues, feedbacks, and fertilizations between different knowledges produced in the global periphery (as proposed in this essay) are essential to that.

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