Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review

51 | 2016

Global History, East Africa and The Classical Traditions

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/316>

DOI: 10.4000/eastafrica.316

ISSN: 2790-1076

Publisher

IFRA - Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2016

Number of pages: 45-59

ISSN: 2071-7245

Electronic reference

Daniel Orrells, "V.Y. Mudimbe and the Myth of Oedipus", *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review* [Online], 51 | 2016, Online since 07 May 2019, connection on 10 December 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/316> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eastafrica.316>

V.Y. Mudimbe and the Myth of Oedipus

Daniel Orrells

Oedipus from Europe to Africa

Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* whose first volume appeared in 1987¹, argued for the disinterment of the historical roots of classical Greece in Afroasiatic civilization. Ancient Egypt and the Near East were, as ancient Greek writers themselves knew, so Bernal contended, the parents of the so-called Greek miracle. It was only in the long nineteenth century that this truth came to be questioned as racist and anti-Semitic. European and North American scholars started to deny this fact and started positing a myth in its place, which argued that ancient Greece had been invaded from the Caucasian north very early in its history, and it was this incursion which formed the basis for the development of ancient Greek culture. By the end of the nineteenth century, as Bernal showed, this myth had become avowedly racial: the northern invaders were Aryans. It was Bernal's purpose in the course of the *Black Athena* trilogy to valiantly reverse this historiographical trend. And Bernal's history of the ancient Mediterranean aroused much attention in African, European and especially American universities. Much ink has been spilt about his account. But whilst it has been very difficult to write a detailed history of the cultural influences of ancient Egypt and Phoenicia on ancient Greece, Bernal's history of nineteenth-century scholarship has found more supporters².

In 2008, a conference at the University of Warwick in the UK sought to move the arguments beyond those who lionized or demonized Bernal's work³. That's to say then, the participants at this event and the resulting edited volume did not want to discuss the stories about ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern migration into ancient Greece. Instead of these very ancient African and Asian diasporas, scholarly attention was turned to a more recent African diaspora, that of the transatlantic transportation of African slaves, whose bodies and minds underpinned the very development of Western modernity. Greek and Roman texts provided modern European powers with models and alibis for their imperialist and colonialist projects. The Greco-Roman world furnished early-modern and Enlightenment-period Europeans with a meta-narrative for the history of the world in general: one of primitive beginnings, an ascent to classical apogee, and then decline and fall. And Sub-Saharan Africa, in these ancient texts, was repeatedly figured as a wild, monstrous place beyond the boundaries of Greco-Roman civilisation.

The transatlantic African diaspora on which Western imperialism and colonialism depended, however, actually provided at the same time the context for a profound questioning of Euro-American conceptualizations of history, tradition, and modernity.

¹ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: Volume 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press, 1987).

² J. Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals* (New Brunswick (NJ)/London: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

³ Daniel Orrells, G. K. Bhamra and T. Roynon. *African Athena: New Agendas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Ironically, it was the very historical occurrence of the modern transatlantic African diaspora that generated a huge and continued contestation over the meaning and legacy of the Greco-Roman tradition. It was this mass dislocation and relocation that brought Africans and their descendants into contact with Greek and Latin texts. African and diasporic African engagement with classical culture, together with the specificity of the experiences of certain modern diasporic intellectuals, ensured that European imperialist constructions of the past, present, and future would not go uncontested. Bernal's account of a fabricated intellectual history that had erased interactions between Europe and Africa from the dawn of time was certainly not the first revisionist intervention into the self-serving meta-narratives of the Western world. The Warwick conference and then the resulting book excavated the prehistory of *Black Athena*. It explored the ways in which the intellectual history that resulted from the modern African diaspora had always been profoundly concerned with the relations between Africa and the classical Mediterranean. It demonstrates that no modern understanding of the classical tradition could have existed without certain conceptualizations of Africa, and how at the same time modern reifications of Africa were often made possible through reference to an ancient past.

This article focuses on one African intellectual who was brought into contact with ancient Greece and Rome because of the colonial situation, an African intellectual who made the Greek and Roman classics his own, following on from this long history of black-Atlantic thinkers since the 1600s who have questioned the Euro-American receptions of antiquity which justified slavery and colonialism in the Americas and Africa. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe was born in what was the Belgian Congo and was first schooled in a Swahili-speaking context. At just ten years of age, he then departed the family home to join a Benedictine seminary in Kakanda and then later in Mwera near Lubumbashi where he learnt to read classical Greek and Latin and ancient Christian texts. The supposedly civilising Greek and Roman classics were central to the colonized subject's education in various African colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Having given up on entering the priesthood, he enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Lovanium (in Kinshasa) shortly after independence in 1960. After graduating in 1966 with a degree majoring in romance philology, Mudimbe went to study sociology and applied linguistics as a graduate student in France and then in Belgium, where he was awarded his doctorate in 1970, after completing a philological study on the evolution of the word 'air' in ancient Greek, Latin, and French.⁴

Very soon afterwards, Mudimbe was appointed a senior Congolese (and from 1972) Zairean academic occupying important positions at the National University of Zaire, in Kinshasa and then Lubumbashi.

He found himself, at a relatively young age, in politically influential and sensitive posts under Mobutu's increasingly oppressive regime.

⁴ On Mudimbe, see P-P. Fraiture, *V.Y. Mudimbe: Undisciplined Africanism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) and P-P. Fraiture, and D. Orrells (eds.) *The Mudimbe Reader* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016) and Mudimbe's autobiography : V-Y. Mubimbe, *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres: Esquisse d'un jardin africain à la bénédictine* (Paris/Montréal: Présence Africaine/Humanitas, 1994a).

The 1960s were, of course, marked by continual political instability in the region. Mudimbe's early published work reflects this volatile situation, as he concentrated his attention on the concept of the African nation and its relationship to European ideas. But whilst other Zairean academics were understandably under pressure to produce panegyrics about Mobutu's new nation, Mudimbe eventually departed Zaire in 1979 in self-imposed exile where he embarked on a highly successful academic career at a string of American universities⁵.

This article examines the evolution of a problem which has been at the heart of Mudimbe's work since the 1970s to the present. His writing demonstrates a continual interest in the relationship between colonialist knowledge systems and anti- and post-colonial thought. This is a central theme in *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe's most well-known book, where he explores the anti- and post-colonial attempts at finding genuinely African methodologies and languages for comprehending African reality⁶. But whilst Mudimbe uncovers a genealogy of African thought in the middle of the twentieth century which 'marks a break with the ideology inherent in the [colonial] anthropologist's techniques of describing African *Weltanschauungen*', he also repeatedly shows how a 'Western methodological grid is a requirement for reading and revealing' the supposed 'truth' about Africa⁷. A central concern for African philosophers, Mudimbe explains, has been to engage with this knotty issue. The Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagame is symptomatic of this problem. Indeed Kagame appears repeatedly in Mudimbe's writings. Kagame is, of course, well known for his use of the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his analyses of Bantu linguistics. And Kagame has received a lot of criticism over the last thirty years for what has become termed 'ethnophilosophy' by figures like Paulin Hountondji⁸. In D.A. Masolo's words, Kagame's whole structural analysis of Bantu languages is merely 'his own invention'⁹. In his book *Tales of Faith*, Mudimbe remembers his friend Kagame as a visiting professor at the National University of Zaire in 1973 when Mudimbe was Dean of Humanities there. He saw Kagame:

'... convert entire annual classes of students to a "nationalist" view of African history and philology'. I told him I feared that such a perspective, by generously glossing over the epistemological preconditions of the murder of the Father, ran the risk of further perverting the discipline of the social science in Africa, already so encumbered by a priori ideological assumptions of "colonial science". His response was surprising to me in its simplicity: "obsession is also a path to the truth"¹⁰.

⁵ P-P. Fraiture, "V-Y. Mudimbe: from the 'Nation' to the 'Global' - 'Who is the Master?'" , *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 27 (3) (2014): 324-342.

⁶ V-Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁷ Ibid. p. 152.

⁸ Ibid. p. 145-52; V-Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 33-45, 51-60; V-Y. Mudimbe, *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa* (London/Atlantic Highlands NJ, 1997), p. 135- 45; Hountondji, P. *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* (Paris: Maspero, 1976).

⁹ D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.95.

¹⁰ V-Y. Mubimbe, *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa* (London/Atlantic Highlands NJ, 1997), p. 140.

Kagame's desire to reify and know Bantu culture led him to teach students to understand African history within a 'nationalist' and potentially dangerous framework. Mudimbe is careful to remind his readers that Kagame was one of the most vocal critics of - in Mudimbe's words - 'the fratricidal conflict between the Tutsis and the Hutus'¹¹. And yet Kagame's linguistic research also had an avowedly political objective, to which Mudimbe is referring here. Kagame was born into an aristocratic family of court historians, a tradition which he continued in his own histories of Rwanda, where he argued that the country should return to the pre-colonial constitutional monarchy, which he depicted as a harmonious society organized along feudalist lines¹². But just as the question of the relationship between African realities and representations of Africa was to plague Kagame's linguistic-philosophical project, so the reception of his historical work also reflected this very issue. His vision became a highly influential image of Rwanda, especially due to his friend, the colonial Belgian anthropologist and art historian, Jacques Macquet, who transcribed this aristocratic representation of pre-colonial Rwanda into ethnographic language. After 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front consolidated its victory by advocating Kagame's and Macquet's image of precolonial Rwandan culture. But as Johan Pottier has examined, this representation greatly simplified and idealized the historical record and was used 'to intellectually justify a system of leadership by Tutsi minority rule'¹³. The applications, to which Kagame's scholarship has been put, demonstrate the impact of inventions of Africa on peoples' lives.

In that passage, Mudimbe respectfully reminds his readers that Kagame's work became a tool for colonialist anthropologists like Macquet, whose writings helped create an image of Rwanda with tragic consequences. Kagame's 'African history and philology' encouraged an essentialising perspective, which might have caused concern to colonial authorities but also replicated 'ideological assumptions of "colonial science"' - as Mudimbe puts it - about the notion of the nation. Kagame's engagement with ancient Greek philosophy was to have a seminal impact on his historical scholarship, which in turn contributed to the reification of cultural and political identity in colonial and postcolonial Rwanda. When Kagame murders the colonial father, he 'gloss[es] over the epistemological preconditions of the murder of the Father'.

That is, the act of parricide reminds Mudimbe of the ancient Greek story of Oedipus - of the son who kills his father only to replace and replicate that paternal figure, Oedipus who sets himself up as King of Thebes the person who will rid the city of the plague, only to find that he himself is its cause rather than the saviour of the city.

Mudimbe's allusion to Oedipus was not simply rhetorical but reflected what he has viewed as the difficult and entangled oedipal relationship between the colonial legacy and the postcolonial African intellectual.

¹¹ Ibid, p.136.

¹² See Herdeck s.v. Kagame, Abbé Alexis, D.E. Herdeck, *African Authors: A Companion to Black African Writing*, second edition (Washington: INSCAPE Corporation, 1974).

¹³ J. Pottier, *Re-imagining Rwanda: Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.111.

That is to say, can the anti- and postcolonial African philosopher only be like Kagame and merely replace the colonial-classical father he has ousted? Mudimbe repeatedly returns to the question of Oedipus in his writings and this essay will spotlight three moments in his career between 1973 and 2011. Indeed the question of origins has a special meaning in Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, where the eponymous hero is engaged in a quest to find out where he comes from and who he is. And Mudimbe's engagement with the myth of Oedipus offers us a nuanced way for thinking about the relationship between colonial discourse and postcolonial critique – that is for thinking about from where postcolonial African philosophy might emerge.

Before turning to Mudimbe himself, then, let us turn back to examine how Mudimbe's interest in Oedipus arises out of a longer history of German and French thinkers, for whom Oedipus had become an important metaphor in trying to articulate the nature of the relationship between the civilised and the savage. Hegel read Oedipus' solution to the riddle of the Sphinx as a myth through which 'humanity in general is summoned to self-knowledge'¹⁴. German philosophers looked back to Oedipus and saw a founding father of philosophy. And it was the triumph of the Greek Oedipus over the Sphinx from Egypt, a land of contradiction, which fascinated Hegel. Oedipus' dialogue with the Sphinx performs the historical encounter between Egyptian blindness and Greek insight. Freud's Oedipus similarly reflected contemporary discourses of race, empire and colonialism. So, just as Hegel had contrasted Greek and Egyptian, so Freud's mapping of the psyche in terms of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious reflected contemporary imperialist archaeology and anthropology which were building an archive of so-called 'primitive cultures'. For Freud, the neurotic and the child would have a demonstrable mental kinship with the so-called primitive "savage". And Freud's *Totem and Taboo* captured the twentieth-century anthropological imagination, so that Claude Lévi-Strauss could argue that the Oedipus story was a paradigmatic myth to explain how myths around the world explore the relationship between nature and culture. Oedipus, then, moves from being the figure of the exemplary philosopher with Hegel to exemplifying subjectivity with Freud to holding the truth about human systems of mythology with Lévi-Strauss. Oedipus could be seen as an exemplary figure in the history of the European colonialist thought: he is the Greek philosopher who conquers the Egyptian other and it is his story which explains everyone else's.

The notion that Oedipus' story is universal exemplifies the history of Eurocentric thought which has continually and imperialistically applied its own logic and categories onto its colonial subjects. If Oedipus' story has become such a powerful explanatory paradigm for the universal emergence of the thinking subject from nature into culture (via Hegel, Freud and Lévi-Strauss), then what has been Mudimbe's response to this European myth of development and progress? How applicable is it to Mudimbe's Africa?¹⁵

¹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1902), p.298.

¹⁵ For the important of Oedipus as an exemplary figure in the history of European thought, see M. Leonard, *Tragic Modernities* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2015).

Herodotean Historiography

We begin in the early '70s, when a young Mudimbe was engaged in writing textbooks for his students as well as more theoretical works on the emancipation of the African academy from old colonial structures. In 1973, Mudimbe published a set of essays written in French called *L'Autre Face du Royaume*, about the possibilities of transforming the bases upon which the human sciences were researched and taught in Africa. One of the pieces in this volume called 'Herodote, Le menteur', or 'Herodotus the Liar', took ancient Greece as its subject. So what was a book about contemporary African academic practice doing having a chapter about the ancient Greek historian? The essay opens with a discussion of Michel Foucault's then recently published book *The Order of Things*, which included an examination of the ethnocentric biases of psychoanalysis and ethnology. And Mudimbe picks out the issue of the 'universal Oedipus thesis', as he calls it, which has helped European scholars to argue that "'primitive societies are'", as Mudimbe puts it, 'a more or less faithful reflection of early humanity'¹⁶. Whilst he does not mention him by name in this essay, Mudimbe's problem with the exportation of the Oedipus complex to the colonies would have clearly reminded his readers of Frantz Fanon's much better known critique of psychoanalysis. Indeed Fanon had argued back in 1961 in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism itself produces a dangerous oedipal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized:

'The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive 'They want to take our place.' It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place'¹⁷.

'Setting himself up in the settler's place': instead of the justification that colonialism educated the native so that he might one day become just like the colonizer, Fanon's punning language describes the colonized subject's desire to overthrow the colonial father in revenge. In *L'Odeur du père (The Smell of the Father)*, published in 1982, Mudimbe would continue to advocate the toppling of the European legacy, in order to 'débloquent une pensée africaine authentique', by citing Fanon: 'The body of History does not determine any single action of mine. I am my own foundation'¹⁸. Mudimbe's language here and in 'Herodotus the Liar' also evokes Jean-Paul Sartre's call to the politically oppressed and colonized to take responsibility for their own fates in an effort to exercise their individual authenticity and freedom. Like Fanon, Sartre too was critical of the universalization of Oedipus and the object of his critique was Claude Lévi-Strauss' co-opting of Oedipus for anthropological studies of 'primitive societies'.

¹⁶ V-Y. Mudimbe, *L'Autre Face du royaume: Une introduction à la critique des langages en folie* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 1973), p.81.

¹⁷ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1961]), p. 30.

¹⁸ V-Y. Mudimbe, *L'Odeur du père: essai sur des limites de la science et de la vie en Afrique noire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982).

‘Sartre was’, as Christopher Johnson puts it, ‘an intransigent partisan of Third World emancipation’, and ‘he saw this emancipation in socialist-progressive terms, as necessarily involving the eventual integration of traditional societies into the mainstream of world history’¹⁹.

Instead of using the Oedipus story to understand where humanity has come from, that is, instead of using it as an anthropological theory to produce ‘a more or less faithful’ - historical - ‘reflection of early humanity’, Mudimbe in ‘Herodotus the Liar’ was interested in trying to unearth the origins of the Oedipus thesis – that is, the origins of the West’s ethnocentrism. Informed by the anti-colonial critiques of Foucault, Fanon and Sartre, then, Mudimbe also has no confidence in the historical paradigm of primitive/civilized which the Oedipus thesis installs. And so he suggests that Greek historical discourse might have provided modern western intellectuals with an ethnocentric model for their own historical writing. To pursue this argument, Mudimbe turns back to Greco-Roman antiquity to uncover the origins of western ethnocentrism. It is Mudimbe’s contention that ancient historians also wrote from an ethnocentric perspective. He focuses on the reception of Herodotus in later Greek historians. We learn that Plutarch on the one hand branded him a liar because he was cruel about Plutarch’s homeland Boeotia, whereas Dionysius of Halicarnassus admired Herodotus because both came from the same city. But Mudimbe goes on:

‘Beyond the criticism and praise they reserve for Herodotus, Plutarch and Dionysius of Halicarnassus share a common exigency ... [The good historian must] ‘offer an image of oneself and of one’s homeland that is as pleasing as possible, if necessary by sully[ing] one’s enemies, but also by endeavouring, as much as possible and within the constraints of certain rules, to adhere to the truth as best as one can. This means that there are voluntary imprecisions or “lies” in the work of Herodotus; and the perspective of Plutarch the Boeotian, wounded by his love for his people and his pride in his homeland, is just as distortional as that of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and his passionate admiration for the work of his compatriot’²⁰.

Writing history in ancient Greek was knowing how to write about one’s own home in the right way. One’s home had to appear ‘as pleasing as possible’ in the narrative, whilst at the same time keeping as close to the truth as possible. As Mudimbe sees it, then, a tension emerges in Greek historical writing as it negotiates the relationship between serving one’s home and serving the truth. Herodotus might have been a liar, but Plutarch was also invested in historical discourse speaking well about his own homeland.

Just as the universalization of the Oedipus thesis reflects a western ethnocentric perspective, so the classical Greek historians, who in Mudimbe’s reading wrote at least in part for the glory of their home, turn out to be ethnocentrically biased. Mudimbe’s essay then turns to nineteenth-century French history-writing, arguing that French colonial-era historians were profoundly marked by the idea that a historian should speak well about one’s homeland. The history of Western historiography has been, then, a history of ethnocentric nationalism.

¹⁹ C. Johnson, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.127.

²⁰ Mudimbe, *L’Autre Face du royaume*, p.89.

And under the influence of Western history-writing the colonial powers installed a ‘universal Oedipus thesis’, a historical paradigm, which imprisoned Africans living in an unchanging primitive present in contrast to the European narrative of development and progress. We might say that ‘Herodotus the Liar’ offered a historical background for Fanon’s diagnosis of the oedipal situation in the colonies.²¹

As has already been mentioned, *L’Autre Face du Royaume*, the book in which ‘Herodotus the Liar’ appeared, sought to provide, as the title suggests, another side to the kingdom, a different sort of language in the contemporary African academy. Research in the social sciences in Africa had to be conducted, as Mudimbe put it elsewhere in his book, ‘by remaining authentically ourselves’. And the allusion to Mobutu’s policy of *Authenticité* can clearly be heard. Mudimbe, a young but senior academic in the newly named country of Zaire, was encouraging his readers to be suspicious about what he calls ‘the credibility of Western readings that concern us’: far from being straightforwardly reliable, authoritative and objective, Western historical discourse has been marked by ethnocentrism and nationalism for some two thousand years. But this superiority complex emerges, Mudimbe’s essay argues, out of a sense of inferiority about the foreigner. Mudimbe’s essay, then, was also to act as a warning to Zaireans attempting to construct their own ‘authentic’ history under the Mobutu regime. And so Mudimbe shouldn’t be seen as a mere puppet of the Zairean president. In the conclusion to the essay, Mudimbe asks, ‘But what of my reading? Was it truly neutral?’ Plutarch had branded Herodotus a liar, but was Mudimbe finally able to tell the truth? Whilst Mudimbe doesn’t answer his own question, he draws attention to his own complicated subject position, thereby posing his own African authenticity as an issue. His critique of the universalization of western historical paradigms in support of a different language for African academics was only possible because of his own colonial-era classical education. Mudimbe conceptualises the complexity of his position in Mobutu’s Zaire in terms of his position in relation to the classical tradition, in that his essay begins with a trenchant critique of that tradition, but ends on a self-questioning note as he ponders his own relationship with it.

Central African Mythology

From a position of more security and privilege in the United States, Mudimbe was able to comment more openly about the relationship between the colonial-classical legacy and his position as a postcolonial African intellectual. This brings us to the second moment in Mudimbe’s career, 1991, the date of the publication of his book *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, where he knowingly describes himself as ‘completely francophonized, submitted to Greco-Roman values and Christian norms’²². The opening chapters of this book examine the African theologians whose work impacted on the young Mudimbe in the ‘50s and ‘60s. The focus is on the adaptation theology of figures such as Vincent Mulago, who attempted to adapt Roman Catholicism to local central African religious customs and practices.

²¹ On Fanon in Mudimbe’s writing, see also P-P. Fraiture, ‘Mudimbe’s *homo absconditus*: Towards a resurrection of the human’, *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 15 (3&4) (2012): 455-75.

²² Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, p.94.

In Mudimbe's account, these rebellious attempts to dethrone the colonial father were entangled in an oedipal relationship. Mulago makes use of intellectual disciplines that he challenges – in Mudimbe's words, 'anthropology, history, and philosophy - as auxiliaries of the new enterprise but does not directly interrogate their incapacity to unveil the reality of traditional beliefs'²³.

And so it's very surprising, then, to see Mudimbe going on in *Parables and Fables* to look at central African traditional belief systems in terms influenced by Lévi-Strauss' interpretation of the Oedipus myth. The French anthropologist's reading of the tale is long and intricate but in its essence Oedipus was a symbol for the progression from nature into culture, from the primitive to the civilised²⁴. Oedipus' triumph over the Sphinx born of the earth signified man's intellectual triumph over nature. As already mentioned, Sartre had found fault with Lévi-Strauss because his analysis of myth seemed to concretise the relationship between the savage and the cooked – a criticism which was aimed at Lévi-Strauss by other anthropologists such as Johannes Fabian²⁵. But Lévi-Strauss, as Mudimbe discusses, was concerned to show how every system of mythology worldwide examined the relationship between nature and culture, thereby showing the similarities between belief systems in economically over- and underdeveloped locations around the globe. Sartre's other critique was perhaps more damning, however. For Sartre, Lévi-Strauss overemphasised the structural: individuals were forced to understand their identities according to age-old mythological systems which supposedly framed their place in world. But in the Preface to *Parables and Fables*, Mudimbe argues that Lévi-Strauss should not be seen as negligent of the issue of individual political agency. Lévi-Strauss, for Mudimbe, can be viewed himself as an individual enacting his political agency in order to make an intervention in colonialist anthropology. Lévi-Strauss with Mudimbe comes to look like a Sartre or a Fanon exercising his authenticity.²⁶

In Chapter 3 of *Parables and Fables*, called 'What is the Real Thing?', Mudimbe examines foundation stories of the Luba state, stories which represent more or less elaborate variations on a basic narrative. Mary Nooter Roberts provides a helpful summary:

'Mbidi Kiluwe, a good-looking hunter appears from the east and brings a new political order to the people who are currently being ruled by the drunken king Nkongolo Mwamba. Mbidi Kiluwe has sex with one of Nkongolo's sisters and their union produces a son called Kalala Ilunga, who goes on to become a heroic warrior like his father. Nkongolo, however, does not like his nephew, and after a long battle with his maternal uncle, Kalala defeats the drunken king, helped by a visionary called Mijibu wa Kalenga, and takes the throne, to institute a sacred kingship. In the oral and written records of royal lineage, all subsequent Luba kings are said to descend from Kalala Ilunga'²⁷.

²³ Ibid. p. 53.

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of Myth*. In *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Basic Books, 1963).

²⁵ J. Fabian, *Time and the other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

²⁶ See further discussion in P-P. Fraiture, *V.Y. Mudimbe: Undisciplined Africanism*.

²⁷ Nooter Roberts, M. and A. F. Roberts (eds) *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History*. The Museum of African Art, (New York: Prestel, 1996).

Mudimbe sees the story in clear Lévi-Straussian terms:

‘The opposition between Nkongolo and Mbidi, or the primitive and the civilized, recites a historical succession and a major paradigm: the origin of history is linked to the foundation of the State. Both witness to the same binary opposition that the myth emphasizes: the possibility of a history means the invention of a refused space and its figures, those of a primitive, which are whisked away in the name of civilization. The meaning of this invention of a pre-history makes itself explicit in the rejection of an original sin. In this confrontation with its own past, a civilized society establishes itself as a cultured space opposed to the untamed nature and its aberrations’ (Mudimbe (1991: 83)).

But Mudimbe goes beyond this analysis. He is interested in the multiple versions of the foundation tale. He hones in on one in which the name of Kalala’s father is withheld. Mudimbe pauses to question the purpose of the withholding of the name. Other versions talk of the competitive relationship between Kalala and his uncle Nkongolo. ‘A question mark is subtly preserved in the mystery of the name of Kalala’s father’, Mudimbe²⁸ notes. The different versions seem to equivocate over whether Kalala was the product of an exogamous or incestuous union. Mudimbe asks: ‘does this mean that Oedipus is the unthought or simply the hidden in the mysterious figure of the king?’²⁹. The myth lends itself to more than one interpretation. Just as much as ‘these stories distinguish the primitive from the civilized’, Mudimbe continues, so they can also symbolise the persistence of the incestuous forbidden. The variation of these stories suggests a complicated and highly sophisticated debate in Luba story-telling culture about the history of the foundation of the state³⁰.

Back in the 1970s, Mudimbe was highly critical of the ‘universal Oedipus thesis’, reflecting the voices of Fanon, Sartre, Foucault and Mulago, all seeking to topple the colonial father. But we also saw that Mudimbe was already aware of the complexities of the relationship between African and European structures of thought - about what the postcolonial African reader might get from those classical texts that were so valorised by the colonial powers. In contrast to Fanon’s and Sartre’s readings of the Oedipus complex, now in *Parables and Fables* Mudimbe is interested in examining the persistence of the past in the African present.

Mudimbe thus offers a different way for conceptualising the relations between precolonial, colonial and postcolonial, in that he is interested in the continuing significance of these foundation stories for central African communities in the ‘80s and ‘90s. And the persistence of the significance of these old, precolonial stories bespeaks a concern to talk about and debate the founding of the state after independence in the postcolonial period, a time when Mudimbe’s homeland had acquired three different names, and then a fourth in 1997. In response to the Sartrean critique that had argued that Lévi-Strauss consigned ‘third-world’ cultures to a mythical past, a Lévi-Straussian reading of mythology, Mudimbe contends, can be an enactment one’s political agency as a postcolonial African intellectual.

²⁸ Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*, p.75.

²⁹ Ibid. p, 77.

³⁰ Ibid. p, 81.

Ancient Libya between History and Myth

Parables and Fables came out when the *Black Athena* debates with which we opened were unfolding. Bernal sought to invert the relationship between Greece and Africa. From an ancient Greek myth as an explanatory tool for understanding the origins of Africa to Africa becoming the origins of ancient Greece and therefore the history of the European tradition: the stakes were certainly high. But Bernal's investment in being able to write a truthful ancient history was problematic in Mudimbe's eyes. For accounts of the impact of ancient Egypt on Greece Bernal relied on the writer Herodotus. But whilst Herodotus might have been interested in Egypt, when he discusses Africa beyond the Egyptian north, he populates Libya with monsters and multi-headed men. Such a writer, Mudimbe contends, can hardly be trusted³¹. And so we arrive at our third and final moment, 2011, when Mudimbe published his essay based on his talk at the *African Athena* conference at Warwick in England. In this piece called 'In the House of Libya', Mudimbe turns to Greek mythology to argue that the Greek cultural imagination had a love-hate relationship with a Libyan mother figure, the progenitor of civilisation but also the wild origins of man. Again we see Mudimbe turning to Lévi-Strauss. Rather than looking to write a history of Africa in the ancient Mediterranean, Mudimbe attempts to uncover the historical roots of Western racist ambivalence towards Africa in ancient Greek myth.

Libya, Mudimbe uncovers, oscillated between possessing two starkly opposing meanings in Greek mythology. Let us very briefly remind ourselves of the background story: Io, impregnated by Zeus, gives birth to Epaphus, king of Egypt, who then fathers Libya. Poseidon impregnates Libya, who then gives birth to twins, Belus and Agenor. Libya's grandchildren are Aegyptus, king of Egypt, who drives out his brother Danaus, who eventually becomes ruler of Argos. Another grandson is Cadmus, who is founder of Thebes in Greece, and Europa is Libya's granddaughter. Mudimbe sees Libya as a 'maternal symbol', who also 'instantiates strife around the Mediterranean basin' as her grandchildren become rulers of competing parts of the Mediterranean world³². Libya 'typifies a sign of the giver of life, and its inherent danger. At the junction of water and land, generation and rebirth, she actuates a crucial thematic of endless perils and recommencements'³³.

Whereas in 'Herodotus in Liar' in 1973, Mudimbe was highly critical of the universality of the Oedipus complex, he revised his position in his 1991 essay 'What is the Real Thing?' He then adjusted it again in 2011 to argue that Herodotus's *Histories* along with Diodorus Siculus's *Universal Library* and Apollodorus's *Library* can all be read through a Lévi-Straussian framework, except this time, it is the Greeks' love-hate relationship with the African mother figure that is at stake rather than the Luba relationship with the Oedipal father. In 1973, Mudimbe argued that Western historiography exemplified by ancient Greek and nineteenth-century French scholarship was tainted by ethnocentrism and nationalism, with the Oedipus complex providing the prime example of European thinking.

³¹ V-Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994b)

³² V-Y. Mudimbe, 'In the House of Libya'. In *African Athena: New Agendas*, eds. D. Orrells, G.K. Bhambra and T. Roynon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p 193.

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 207-8.

In 1991, Mudimbe wanted to show that the Lévi-Straussian interpretation of the Oedipus story could be applicable to societies both European and African, both capitalist and pre-capitalist, both pre- and post-colonial. And then in 2011, Mudimbe contends that in a whole history of ancient writers both Greek and Roman, a Lévi-Straussian oedipal concern about the relationship between Greek culture and Libyan ‘Mother Nature’ persisted.

Thinking about the history of Mudimbe’s engagement with Greek historiography and the Oedipus complex offers us a nuanced perspective into the history of Mudimbe’s negotiation with the history of colonial and postcolonial inventions of Africa. We have examined Mudimbe’s strong critique in the 1970s of the ethnocentrism of the Oedipus complex, which he traces back to ancient ethnocentric bias. And yet we saw that whilst Mudimbe was happy to brand the European tradition from Herodotus onwards as a lie, he was not sure of the truth he was meant to tell as an authentic African intellectual in postcolonial Zaire. In the early 1990s, once based in the US, Mudimbe was able to look back at that early postcolonial period and examine his classical-Christian education more openly. He is critical of adaptation theology’s attempts to overthrow the colonial father’s logic, and yet his continued suspicions about the possibilities of writing a truthful and objective history of Africa to replace the European lies lead him in *Parables and Fables* to develop an interest in the possible applications of Lévi-Strauss’s mode of reading myth. He thereby provided subsequent Africanists with a sophisticated model for conceptualizing the relationship between precolonial stories of origins and the postcolonial polity. Finally, the Lévi-Straussian structure in Mudimbe’s thinking has become so powerful that it framed his intervention in the *Black Athena* debates. Mudimbe replaced Bernal’s ‘Revised Ancient Model’ with a model bequeathed by Lévi-Strauss, in an attempt to argue that behind the Hellenocentric accounts of origins produced by ancient Greek writers lay a concern about the relationship with an African mother.

But Mudimbe’s 2011 turn away from a historical contextualization of how Greek mythography was produced comes at a risk. His Lévi-Straussian reading of Greek myth has radically dispensed with a historical context for the production of those myths, which is tantamount to arguing that there is a (single?) truth to a Greek myth, just as Martin Bernal had done.

Mudimbe joins an illustrious line of thinkers who have looked to antiquity to see what they want to see in the story of Oedipus, a story of huge explanatory power. We began by looking at the example of Alexis Kagame’s attempt to overthrow the colonial father only to risk replacing him. Some might view Mudimbe as falling into the same trap. But we might also see it in a different way: ‘In the House of Libya’ does not testify to Mudimbe’s thralldom to Lévi-Straussian anthropology but his concern to show the origins of the West’s love-hate relationship with Africa, an idyllic mother figure *and* political breakdown and strife. As with his essay ‘What is the Real Thing?’, Mudimbe yet again demonstrates the connections and relationships between precolonial, colonial and postcolonial inventions of Africa. And like ‘Herodotus the Liar’, he shows how far back Western ethnocentrism stretches and how that oedipal past might continue to recur and persist in the present.

In showing the exemplarity of the Oedipus myth for understanding the history of the invention of the African continent, we might indeed venture to say that Mudimbe is exemplary in his willingness and responsibility to wrestle with the intricate intellectual history through which he has lived. Thinking about Mudimbe's engagement with the Oedipus myth allows us to disinter the complexities of Mudimbe's intellectual filiations: brought up hearing the old Luba stories, then educated in the Greek and Roman classics and theology at a Benedictine Seminary and then in colonial Belgium, and yet at the same time nourished on different models of anti-colonial thought in Fanon, Sartre, Foucault and Mulago, whilst also being profoundly informed by Lévi-Strauss. Mudimbe's relationships with these paternal figures of intellectual authority cannot be reduced to an image of oedipal parricide. Instead Mudimbe has grown out of several very different intellectual traditions, never forgetting his multiple pasts in continually creative and imaginative attempts to transform what these figures might mean for the postcolonial African philosopher.

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