

PARRICIDE AND A HARDENED FORRESTER

Sanya Osha

PARRICIDE AND A HARD- ENED FORRESTER

Wim van Binsbergen, Valentin Mudimbe, and
African Knowledge Systems



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Chapter 1. Introducing the hardline according to Wim van Binsbergen

The notion of parricide is very important to the production of knowledge, new discursive formations, and, to employ a concept of Deleuze and Guattari's, the production of production. In theoretical discourse, parricide is not a destructive notion because it includes elements of performativity, circulation and enhancement. Jacques Derrida, a former student of Michel Foucault, deconstructs in a devastating manner the latter's *Madness and Civilization* concentrating on mainly three pages of the text. Derrida begins his famous critique by stating that the disciple's consciousness is an unhappy one when faced with the ego of the master. But Derrida's critique transcends the repressive consciousness of the disciple to attain difference and realisation. So in this sense, parricide becomes a force of production not only in the history of ideas but also in the history of human civilisation. Louis Althusser in an act of unintended parricide attempts to rewrite the texts of Marx and the history of Marxism. His act is a largely sympathetic one because he intends to transform the violence of omission into the violence of inclusion. Intellectual history is littered with similar exercises. Deleuze and Guattari in an attempt to liberate individual agency and chart a new libidinal economy, expose the repressiveness of Freudism. Parricide is always at the centre of the production of production.

Employing the concept of parricide, this essay examines some of the works of the Dutch Africanist scholar, Wim van Binsbergen and the ef-

fects they produce in the field of African studies. Van Binsbergen's work is important in the field for many reasons and the choice of his work is informed by the productive fields it further highlights. Thus any serious discussion of his work is bound to lead to other conditions of possibility, parricidal ones included. Furthermore, van Binsbergen by his close reading of V.Y. Mudimbe reveals interesting potential formations for the field of African studies.

This essay adopts two main strategies. First, it is a reading of van Binsbergen's work and also a reading of Mudimbe, to demonstrate how flows, continuities and ruptures are employed as productive forces, and how the deterritorialised and alienated African consciousness can profit from these disjunctive flows, continuities and ruptures.

Wim van Binsbergen's interventions, I would claim, deghettoise the field of African studies since ghettoisation has always been the bane of the field, his works, barring any racial prejudices, are efforts of incorporation within the global discursive economy. Needless to say, the deghettoisation of the field is an act of liberation and an invitation to production, production at a more machinic level.

The organisation of discourse at several levels is due to a desire to be free. Without discourse life and production become impossible. Relatedly, the body must possess functioning organs in order to aid processes of production. What is the nature of the body of Africa? What are her organs and how do they function? To answer these questions we shall have to revisit the event of the Atlantic slave trade, the colonial situation and the dynamics and structures of neocolonialism and imperialism. The highlighting of these major events of African history would reveal the nature of the African body. Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise the relationship between power, production and the body:

“the desiring-machines attempt to break into the body without organs, and the body without organs repels them, since it experiences them as an over-all persecution apparatus”¹

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

These observations alert us to the operations of power, capital and other forms of oppression that structure and delimit existence. The task would be to project a productive consciousness into the “overall persecution apparatus”. In other words, to make the production of production our sole preoccupation. This recontextualisation of the law of the production of production only seeks to explain how rudimentary processes are further inscribed into other complex processes. Discourse only becomes aware of its limits in relation to other discourses. Similarly, the law of the production of production is thus defined:

“every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow, in relation to the machine connected to it.”²

And where does van Binsbergen fit into all this? It is in discovering new discursive flows within the field of African studies that transform a condition of lack, aberration and deterritorialisation into opportunities for intervention and recontextualisation. Human situations and seemingly pre-determined categories are meant to be transcended by acts that reinscribe the element of contingency in all affairs.

Professor Wim van Binsbergen’s academic career has been a most interesting one which delineates trajectories of cosmopolitanism, hybridity, difference and recolonisation (in the positive sense). He began as an anthropologist and ended up as a philosopher of culture or rather a specialist of interculturality. These various trajectories taken in a strict professional context have also been profoundly shaped by a personal history that has had to confront under especially difficult circumstances, questions pertaining to objectivity in the social sciences and research methodologies and the role of personal consciousness on the conditions of truth. These personal and professional contexts reveal so much about questions of identity, situationality and commitment in an age of advanced capitalism. In a telling passage, van Binsbergen discloses the peculiar professional

nia trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. R. Lane London: The Athlone Press Ltd, 1984. p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

and personal transformations that have occurred in his life:

“In the town of Francistown, Botswana, from 1988, under circumstances which I have discussed at length elsewhere – the usual form of fieldwork became so insupportable to me that I had to throw overboard all professional considerations. I became not only the patient of local diviner-priests (*sangomas*), but at the end of a long therapy course ended up as one of them, and thus as a believer in the local collective representations. At the time I primarily justified this as a political deed, for me as a white man in an area which had been disrupted by white monopoly capitalism. Now more than then I realize that it was also and primarily an epistemological position-taking – a revolt against the professional hypocrisy in which the hegemonic perspective of anthropology reveals itself. It was a position taking which in fact expelled me from cultural anthropology (although I did so by my own choice) and which created the conditions for the step which I finally made when occupying my present chair in intercultural philosophy.”³

He continues,

“becoming an intercultural philosopher means a further step: one that amounts to integrating that deed in a systematic, reflective and intersubjective framework, in order to augment the anecdotal, autobiographical ‘just so’ account with theoretical analysis, and to explore the social relevance of an individual experience.”⁴

These two passages describe the peculiar professional and personal contexts just mentioned. They reveal also how postmodernity is deeply structured by borderless limits, far-flung spiritual homes and forms of community that reduce and transcend our traditional conceptions of locale and belonging. It is also interesting to observe how van Binsbergen applies this mode of analysis to Mudimbe’s project. In doing so, we are afforded interpretative perspectives that unravel both the strengths and weaknesses

³ Wim van Binsbergen. “An Incomprehensible Miracle: Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion: a close reading of Valentin Mudimbe’s *Tale of Faith*”. Paper presented at SOAS, 1st February 2001; meanwhile published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2005, ‘ “An incomprehensible miracle” – Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion: A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe’s *Tales of Faith*’, in: Kai Kresse, ed., *Reading Mudimbe*, special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 17, 1, June 2005: 11-65; also at: <http://www.shikanda.net/publications/ASC-1239806-193.pdf>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

of the project.

Mudimbe's career has been no less interesting. A holder of a doctorate in linguistics, his scholarship has been marked with a high level of interdisciplinarity. It has also been influenced by the huge backdrop of North Atlantic intellectual traditions that have influenced his life. Mudimbe being a highly commodified scholar within the American academy, is re-read by van Binsbergen to trace the effects of his positionality on the prioritization of interests and the structural attributes of his different discourses. Oftentimes van Binsbergen's insights on Mudimbe demonstrate how the infrastructure of consciousness, processes of identity formation and actualities of localisation motivate and delimit what is said, how it is said and the effects therefrom. The lesson being we must not underestimate the technologies of dispersal and the deceptions of authenticity that are at work all the time.

Two of Mudimbe's texts, *The Invention of Africa* and *The Idea of Africa* account for his distinguished standing within the field of African studies. But it is through Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith* that van Binsbergen discovers the full implications of the former's discursive preoccupations. It is also through a reading of *Tales of Faith* that the stolid architecture of a text such as *The Invention of Africa* unfolds under less formal anecdotal circumstances.

At this juncture it is necessary to cast into bolder relief the original ideas of Mudimbe and the paths through which van Binsbergen has granted us a rediscovery of them. This conceptual nexus seeks to do two things – first to restate the formidable dimensions of Mudimbe's project and second, to demonstrate how van Binsbergen's reading of it not only casts the latter's project as a possible alternative but also reveals the ultimate limits of the former's *oeuvre*. In so doing, we shall see how travelers through both metropolitan and peripheral cultures describe various destinies that sometimes connect with or sometimes cross out each other.

Chapter 2. V. Y. Mudimbe: Some Discursive Geographies

In the introduction to *The Invention of Africa* Mudimbe states that his text is

“a sort of archaeology of African gnosis as a system of knowledge in which major philosophical questions recently have arisen”.⁵

It is also

“a critical synthesis of the complex questions about knowledge and power in and on Africa”⁶.

The last remark immediately reveals the Foucauldian / Saidian character of Mudimbe’s programme. Within the European archive, Africa had been portrayed as a grim locus of Hobbesian strife and entropy. It had no arts, no letters and no civilisation as variously recounted by prominent philosophers such as Hegel and Hume. Thus it became an object for elaborate Eurocentric demonology.

But European postures and responses towards Africa did not end with demonology alone. Mudimbe writes that

“three complementary hypotheses and actions emerge: the domination of physical space, the reformation of natives’ minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective”.⁷

However, Western colonial policies only led to the peripheralisation and

⁵ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1988. p. x

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

underdevelopment of the colonial dependencies in addition to increasing alienation from the dominant structures of the global economy. The colonial / postcolonial situation also destroyed the internal coherence and stability of the dependencies in a way that

“a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies”.⁸

At a less theoretical level, Mudimbe also lists well known African problems such as

“demographic imbalance, extraordinarily high birth rates, progressive disintegration of the classic family structure, illiteracy, severe social and economic disparities, dictatorial regimes functioning under the cathartic name of democracy, the breakdown of religious traditions, the constitution of syncretic churches, etc”.⁹

Mention should also be made of how Mudimbe inscribes this graphic canvas of entropy within the larger abstract canvas of Foucauldian art criticism. We are left to ponder the meaning of light and shade, the structures and poses of the human body as appropriated by technologies of power and inscription. Through this description we see the dark phantomised African body as it was appropriated and reinvented through the long traditions of the European artistic imagination. The results are a libinal economy that branded the African body within a flow that was beneath unreason. Having ascribed to Africans a status well below European humanity, the same Europeans directed the instruments of science and rationality towards not only the complete subjugation of the African body but also African lands. The Atlantic slave trade and colonisation were the twin weapons that were employed to achieve these ends. Mudimbe describes the methods by which European intellection sought the appropriation of the African mind, body and land:

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

“Evolution, conquest and difference become signs of a theological, biological, and anthropological destiny, and assign to things and beings both their natural slots and social mission. Theorists of capitalism, such as Benjamin Kidd and Karl Pearson in England, Paul Leroy-Beaulieu in France, Friedrich Naumann and Friedrich von Bernhard in Germany, as well as philosophers, comment upon two main complimentary paradigms. These are the inherent superiority of the white race, and, as already made explicit in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, the necessity for European economies and structures to expand to “virgin areas” of the world.”¹⁰

Thus the entire spectrum of European cultural practices was deployed for the task of the total subjugation of ‘lesser’ peoples. Mudimbe’s analysis not only depicts this, it also demonstrates the place and task of each academic speciality in the subjugation and the re-invention of the African subject. In this way, the organless African body was open to the most relentless Eurocentric technologies of power. In making these important disciplinary distinctions, Mudimbe accomplishes an uncommonly sophisticated analysis of the colonising structure. Furthermore, these distinctions highlight the value of archaeological demonstrations as a searchlight for showing up the microphysics of power and how it reaches deep into even the most apparently insignificant of structures and social formations. For instance, it is noted that anthropology which had been designated to scrutinise objects and subjects that were regarded as inferior, backward and underdeveloped was also marshalled to explore ways by which uncivilized peoples can be inserted into modern civilisation.¹¹

For Mudimbe, the theories of Lévi-Strauss and Foucault uncover a crucial conceptual difficulty within the intellectual socius which is that

“we lack a theory that could solve the dialectic tension between creative discourses and the epistemological field which makes them possible, on the one hand, and Lévi-Strauss’s unconscious that sustains discourses and accounts for their organization, on the other.”¹²

After the European intellectual reconstruction of the African conscious-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

ness had been effected, an emergent class of African intellectuals rose to deconstruct the Eurocentric inventions. This included theorists and thinkers such as W. E. Abraham, O. Bimwenyi, F. Eboussi Boulaga, Paulin Hountondji, T. Obenga, T. Okere, J. O. Sodipo, I. Sow, M. Towa, Kwasi Wiredu and a host of others.¹³ Again, Mudimbe reiterates the importance of Foucauldian theories on the pervasive power / knowledge nexus for the deconstruction of Western constructs of Africa. His conclusion is that

“the African postulation would seem situated, metaphorically, between Nietzsche’s predicament and Foucault’s enterprise”.¹⁴

Also in tracing the archaeology of African responses to hegemonic Eurocentric stereotypes, Mudimbe states that

“in these enterprises one notes a remarkable mediation between the rigor of a philosophical exercise and the fantasies of a political insurrection”.¹⁵

Mudimbe names three crucial figures from Western culture who were central to the construction of Eurocentric stereotypes regarding Africa and colonial dependencies generally;

“The explorer, at the end of the fifteenth century was looking for a sea-route to India. Later on, he concerned himself with mapping out the continent and, in the nineteenth century, compiling information and organizing complex bodies of knowledge, including medicine, geography, and anthropology. The soldier constituted the most visible figure of the expansion of European jurisdiction. He built castles and forts on the coasts, was in charge of trading posts, participated in the slave trade, and, in the nineteenth century, implemented colonial power. Finally, there was the missionary, whose objective has been, throughout the enterprise, the most consistent: to expand “the absoluteness of Christianity” and its virtues.”¹⁶

Mudimbe stresses the point that the missionary as a representative of Christendom and also the Colonial Empire was very crucial to the de-

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

struction and subsequent transformation of traditional African societies. In other words, the tasks of the missionary went in several directions which included spiritual, moral and educative responsibilities. Construed from this perspective, it becomes understandable why colonialism has had such a transformative impact on precolonial societies. The transformation of those precolonial societies assumed a serious intellectual form when missionaries began to problematise the relationship between Western Culture – read also Christianity – and those traditional societies on the one hand, and the status of their duties as agents of moral and social transformation, on the other.

The nature of this problematisation is revealed in the work of the Belgian missionary, Placide F. Tempels who is known primarily as the author of *Bantu Philosophy*. Mudimbe describes the text thus:

“Rather than as a philosophical treatise [...] *Bantu Philosophy* could be understood simultaneously as an indication of religious insight, the expression of cultural doubt about the supposed backwardness of Africans, and a political manifesto for a new policy of promoting “civilization” and Christianity.”¹⁷

However, the overriding thrust of missionary discourse regarding precolonial societies tended to view those societies as paganistic, savage and uncivilised. As such, they were derided in the most glaring terms. Christianity as conceived within the context of the same missionary discourse was associated with reason, history and power and was the primary medium by which the savagery of precolonial societies could be eradicated.

Nonetheless, Christianity in its undiluted Europeanised version was never completely transplanted in African soil and consciousness. Consequently,

“Tempels absolutely doubted the classical process of conversion: he was not sure in the least that assimilation constituted the best way, and he hated the “evolués”, whom he considered as bad copies of Europeans,”¹⁸.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

The reality of this ambiguous transplantation of Christianity to African soil is captured in the following passage:

“If European Catholicism seems to be aging dangerously, the dynamism of its African counterpart belongs either to a holy nightmare or, if one prefers, to an incredible miracle: monasteries are being built; new religious movements, both activist and charismatic, are appearing and organizing themselves successfully.”¹⁹

In other words, what followed was a process of Africanisation, indigenisation, naturalisation and adaptation of European Christianity. The African experience of slavery, exploitation and colonisation is also understood within a revised Judeo-Christian context; that just like the Jews, Africans were God’s chosen people:

In spite of this African response to Christianity, the African subject still continued to be a target of Eurocentric anthropological projects, the major hypothesis being “that Africans must evolve from their frozen state to the dynamism of Western civilization.”²⁰

Mudimbe then begins to explore the reactions of European thinkers to this pervasive Eurocentric racism towards the African subject. Jean-Paul Sartre is credited with transforming *negritude* into a major political event. Sartre argues that the Negro,

“creates an anti-racist racism. He does not at all wish to dominate the world: he wishes the abolition of racial privileges wherever they are found.”²¹

However, in spite of this intervention on behalf of *negritude* as a philosophy of consciousness by Sartre, it has not been well received by the generality of African intellectuals especially within the Anglophone bracket. And one of the most consistent critics of *negritude* is Wole Soyinka.

Oftentimes, Soyinka centres his critique of *negritude* around the figure of Léopold Sédar Senghor, its chief exponent. He writes,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

“Leopold Sédar Senghor was a priest – but a failed one”²².

More explicitly, Soyinka faults negritude on the basis that:

“Senghor appears compelled to quarry deep into the humanism of the oppressed to escape the undeniable pressure of history, counter its imperatives in the present with an excursion into pristine memory, and forge, from within its purity and innocence, an ethos of generosity whose lyrical strength becomes its main justification.”²³

From this, it clear that negritude in its Senghorian conception is for Soyinka an ideology of romantic simplicism lacking any real revolutionary properties. To discover the revolutionary potentials of negritude, Soyinka argues that we look for them in the work of Jacques Roumain, Etienne Lero and René Depestre who “represented the non-negotiable sector of the province of Negritude”²⁴ and not in Senghor, Damas and Aimé Césaire. But is Soyinka’s reading of the Senghorian conception of negritude complete? Mudimbe’s account gives a different interpretation which enriches the debate. Indeed Sartre demonstrates that negritude was not only a purely literary tendency but also an ideological construct that espouses evident revolutionary properties.

Mudimbe for his part urges us to view negritude as an outcome of the alienation caused by colonialism.²⁵ It is also an African ideology of otherness constructed to challenge and subvert racist Eurocentric claims pertaining to the African subject. In Mudimbe’s words

“negritude becomes the intellectual and emotional sign of opposition to the ideology of white superiority.”²⁶

Through Mudimbe’s reading of the Senghorian conception of negritude, the various seemingly hidden dimensions of the philosophy are thrown

²² Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory: The Muse of Forgiveness*, New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

²⁵ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 1988 p. 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

into bolder relief. In fact, it contains an inverted form of Hegelianism with all the same philosophical currents of totalisation. According to Mudimbe:

Negritude and Marxist humanism are, according to Senghor, only stages in a dynamic dialectic process towards a universal civilization. Interpreting hypotheses of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Senghor bases his ideas of a universal civilization upon laws of evolution. He believes that the movement from microentities to more complex ones and finally consciousness expresses a natural law. This would imply at least three major theses: the principle of development of all human beings, the principle of harmony in development of God's existence as a natural necessity. Senghor thinks that some basic African values are well expressed in this perspective; namely the idea of community, the principle of harmony between evolving humans and changing nature, and finally, the vision of a unitary universe.²⁷

The inclusion of the Marxist humanist element in the ideology of negritude immediately creates other nuances that Soyinka's account fails to reveal. This makes Soyinka's reading quite suspect even though he has maintained a long standing and problematic ideological engagement with the Senghorian version of negritude. Mudimbe's account on the other hand establishes negritudist philosophy within a much broader conceptual canvas and the various contexts – geographical, literary, ideological and personal – from which it emerged as a philosophy of consciousness together with the numerous discursive elements that went into its construction. And then in demarcating the lines of Senghor's ideological pursuits, Mudimbe establishes connections with Edward Blyden's own preoccupations which developed in another era.²⁸ Again, this demonstrates that we have look beneath the surface in any description of Senghor's project.

Let us now return to the theme of parricide. Every new major philosopher rewrites and / or subverts the preceding one. Gramsci and Althusser in their various ways rewrite Marx. Althusser writes of his project;

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

“What I essentially tried to do was to make Marx’s theoretical texts intelligible in themselves and for us as readers, because they were often obscure and contradictory, if not deficient in respect of certain key points.”²⁹

Derrida reads Rousseau’s *Confessions* and constructs a theory of the sexual “supplement” which he interprets as a metaphor of castration. Rewriting, recontextualisation counter-interpretation and supplementarity are all variables of parricide within the epistemological field. Events from the African context also bear this out.

Tshiamalenga argues that

“Tempels constructed a philosophy but did not *reconstruct* Bantu philosophy.”³⁰

Kagame addresses the theoretical limitations of Tempels’s project. Tshiamalenga in turn points out the shortcomings of Kagame’s programme. In this way, conceptual rigour gradually evolves. Hountondji on his own part does not merely subvert a philosophical figure, instead he directs his attack on the entire school of ethnophilosophy. These various critiques and projects mark crucial turning-points in African philosophical discourse.

Mudimbe writes that

“the history of knowledge in Africa and about Africa appears deformed and disjointed, and the explanation lies in its own origin and development.”³¹

In concluding, Mudimbe offers an important formulation:

The conceptual framework of African thinking has been both a mirror and a consequence of the experience of European hegemony; that is, in Gramsci’s terms, “the dominance of one social bloc over another, not simply by means of force or wealth, but by a social authority whose ul-

²⁹ Louis Althusser, *The Future lasts a long Time* trans. R. Veasey London: Vintage, 1993. p. 221.

³⁰ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 1988 p. 140.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

timate sanction a profound cultural supremacy”.³²

Undoubtedly, Mudimbe uses texts, discourses, myths, fables and repressed voices from African social experience / history and also the hegemonic Western *episteme* to trace an archaeology of absence, silence, passive resistance, ambivalence and finally positive articulation. This alone is no ordinary accomplishment. However, the question at this juncture is what are the possibilities of this accomplishment for articulating an emancipatory kind of politics? Without a cursory glance in this direction, his formulations might appear rather staid or over-determined.

Furthermore, Mudimbe’s archaeological constructions frequently refer to Foucault whose critiques of the technologies of power are widely known. Thus, employing the Foucauldian paradigm of power / knowledge, he deconstructs the Eurocentric invention of Africa. The point would be to turn the basis of that same critique upon the work of Africans who carry out similar ethnocentric projects of invention and mystification. There are other ways of augmenting – not rewriting – Mudimbe’s text.

Edward Said, the Palestinian critic also employs Foucault as a model of theorisation and emancipatory politics in relation to the question of Palestine. And with the work of Foucault complete and also largely situated within the Western epistemological field, Said becomes the heir apparent of that kind of emancipatory politics. His texts, notably *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* are also deconstructions of Western theories of otherness regarding the Orient. Nonetheless, other theoretical dimensions broaden the scope of his project. Meanwhile, let us return to Mudimbe.

Mudimbe employs an astonishing array of language games and discourses. The effect of this is that the field of African studies is enormously deparochialised with a spirit of inventiveness. However such efforts at deparochialisation are never complete. For instance in spite of his theoretical breadth he does not fully situate the African subject as an object of Western knowledge within the Freudian thesis of oedipalisation as

³² *Ibid.*, p. 185.

it applies to his subject and context and also the various other discourses of de-oedipalisation. For some reason, Mudimbe's representations of the African subject or more precisely body are theorised into absence or rather not at all. Instead of the presence of the body as lived consciousness as is so explicit in Senghor's interventions and in the discourse of African surrealists, the text (in a deterritorialising form) in Mudimbe's project, assumes the place of the absent body. The text becomes both frame and skeleton. The body on the other hand retreats into infinity and its absence is not noticed let alone missed. These observations are strictly limited to his text, *The Invention of Africa*.

There are yet other ways of augmenting in theoretical terms the epistemological field curved up by Mudimbe. There is need to examine other technologies through which knowledge is constituted in contemporary times. For instance, the electronic media as opposed to print has become the dominant mode in not only the constitution but also the dissemination of forms of knowledge. It has also led to the homogenisation of a plurality of cultural forms in such a way that the question of what constitutes identity has become exceptionally problematic. The creation of the mass society during the twentieth century is also central to this development.

Analysing the nature of forms of knowledge in postindustrial societies, Jean-Francois Lyotard distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge – one narrative, the other scientific. Narrative knowledge is classified as

“savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology”.³³

On the other hand, scientific knowledge develops into a profession and gives rise to institutions, and in modern societies language games consolidate themselves in the form of institutions run by qualified partners (the professional class).³⁴

³³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. p. 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The dichotomisation of forms of knowledge within post-Fordist contexts requires a rethink of the issue in postcolonial societies as well. This is because the dynamic of contemporary globalisation results oftentimes in powerful homogenising tendencies. The electronic media as a means of information has become global. Bourdieu and Baudrillard have demonstrated the far reaching consequences of the growth of new information technologies. As a result, specialists in postcolonial theory are compelled to attain other levels of problematisation. This of course also applies to Mudimbe.

It should be interesting to know how Mudimbe treats woman as an object of knowledge in the epistemological field. *The Invention of Africa* does not dwell on this which in itself may constitute evidence of phallocentrism. Obviously this discussion is better left for another occasion. Nonetheless, van Binsbergen's own reading of Mudimbe should serve as an even more important avenue for further theoretical augmentation. The reason being that race, identity, globalism and commitment under the searchlight of van Binsbergen's reading, are radically transformed within the context of the cultural moment.

Chapter 3. Connections and Differences:

Wim's re-reading of V. Y.

Van Binsbergen's reading of Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith* is almost parri-
cidal even though the latter is not the former's philosophical father in the
actual sense. Van Binsbergen in his paper, "An Incomprehensible Mira-
cle", writes that he wishes to

"concentrate on *Tales of Faith*, but connecting as much as possible to
the rest of Mudimbe's work, and to his person to the extent that this
transpires in the published texts".³⁵

He continues,

"I will be very critical, not out of lack of respect and admiration, but
because the fundamental issues of Africa and of African studies today
manifest themselves around Mudimbe as a central and emblematic fig-
ure, and we need to bring out those issues".

Van Binsbergen classifies Mudimbe's method as being "kaleidoscopic
and eclectic". More fundamentally, van Binsbergen identifies the leitmo-
tif of homelessness that runs through the text. On the question of
Mudimbe's methodology or the lack of it he writes:

"The insistence on the book review method suggest how Mudimbe
identifies himself in his authorial practice. The effect of this method is
the avoidance of a systematic conceptual framework, the avoidance of
faithful submission to any established academic discipline except the
discipline of literary studies whence Mudimbe seems to derive, as the
main model of his intellectual products, the virtually unbounded con-
ventions of the "essay", with its generous allowance (ever since the

³⁵ Wim van Binsbergen, "An Incomprehensible Miracle", *o.c.*

emergence of the essay as a genre in eighteenth century Great-Britain) of conceptual freedom, literary originality, and limited empirical expectations or requirements.”³⁶

Mudimbe’s text discusses religion and politics in Central Africa, however van Binsbergen charges him of not situating the topics according to current discursive practices. Instead, Mudimbe treats both religion and politics according to their original etymological connotations which in spite of it all greatly undermines his text’s contributions to the history of ideas and also African religious studies. Furthermore, van Binsbergen extends and recontextualises both the reality and metaphor of homelessness that he associates with Mudimbe.

Homelessness becomes not only an acute physical reality but also gets defined as an instance of intellectual alienation. The metaphor of homelessness is thus extended:

“Mudimbe does not explicitly, and unequivocally choose a constituency in Africa among the African masses and their cultural, political and religious expressions, neither does he consistently and compellingly choose a disciplinary constituency in North Atlantic academic life, apart from the lack of methodological and theoretical constraint which the literary form of the kaleidoscopic, collage-like essay accords him.”³⁷

This interpretation of homelessness and textual inscription in the face of death – after the great French surrealists and more importantly Nietzsche – becomes once again universalised in the field of African intellection. As hinted earlier, Mudimbe’s rootlessness is not merely physical, it encompasses spiritual and intellectual dimensions. In that way, personal circumstances and consciousness, van Binsbergen explains, are projected into an apparently rationalistic discourse.

Rather than conceptualising the structure of meaning and the rigour of the concept, the ecstasy and eclecticism of release are set loose. This claim is corroborated when van Binsbergen writes:

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

“The book testifies to a great creative and scholarly mind who can afford to play with the canons of scholarship; first of all because his qualifications in this field are incontestable, secondly and more importantly because to him these canons are merely effective stepping-stones (the Wittengsteinian ladder he may cast away after climbing up), leading towards something even more valuable: the articulation of identity and personal struggle in the face of death and homelessness.”³⁸

Mudimbe’s largely self-inflicted isolation turns him away from studying what would otherwise be an interesting angle; “the African people”, the formal political institutions which are to some extent shaped and challenged by these people have expressed themselves in precolonial times and which have in part persisted since the advent of Christianity in the region”.³⁹

Consequently, Mudimbe for all his Foucauldian theoretical superstructure, in the final analysis, subverts that very superstructure. For central to Foucauldianism is the active articulation of difference, otherness and silence. Mudimbe in turning away from this certainly casts away some of Foucault’s key theses. Also, Afrocentricism which is in part a reaction to Eurocentricism

“is reduced by Mudimbe to a mere act of Freudian transference, i.e. distorted self-projection out of touch with reality”.⁴⁰

Instead he aligns himself with “Kwame Appiah, another cosmopolitan African philosopher who has endeared himself to the North Atlantic audience by rejecting the essentialism of Africanness”.⁴¹

Thus Mudimbe, in spite of being

“the most applauded critic of North Atlantic and African constructions of Africa”⁴²

is not beyond parricide since his [Mudimbe’s] strident typification that

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*

Afrocentricism is sheer transference of an inferiority complex among today's AfricanAmericans⁴³ is an unequivocal attempt to debunk an established ideological school. Van Binsbergen interprets Mudimbe's stance not just in terms of cultural and geographical moorings. At a deeper level, it speaks of

“a profound methodological dilemma which attends the entire empirical study of African religion: through participant observation or through African believers' introspection”.⁴⁴

This dilemma, we are made to understand, is product of Mudimbe's elaborate withdrawal from the palpable African socius.

Van Binsbergen makes two incisive claims about a scholar who he agrees has a truly great cosmopolitan mind. The thrust is that:

“Mudimbe analyzes other people's Tales, Parables and Fables, Ideas and Inventions, but for his personal needs retreats to the bare and windy rocks of agnosticism. His Africa is not that of other people, it does not exist as a tangible reality for himself, but at best constitutes a context for contestation, a laboratory for the politics of the liberation of difference.”⁴⁵

Van Binsbergen's other claim is that

“the construction of self through the liberation of difference ... is a politics of textual performance, not of substance: asserting difference, not contents, seems to be the game”.⁴⁶

Finally, van Binsbergen dwells on the idea of cultural *métissité* which he defines as

“the condition of being of cultural mixed descent”.⁴⁷

Obviously, with the current wave of global capitalism and surges of

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

recolonisation (in the form of cultural reappropriation), this condition is certain to mark and shape humanity profoundly. However, for all their differences, Mudimbe and van Binsbergen are connected by a common axiom which is

“the impossibility of reducing anyone, any human culture, to an immobile essence”.⁴⁸

Their trajectories as individuals and also as academics meet within the field of African studies even though their approaches and concerns may not always be the same. Thus the espousal of a basic anti-essentialism in their approaches and practices may reveal stimulating continuities. Conceived in this way van Binsbergen’s reading of Mudimbe is also a mode of discursive augmentation.

At this juncture, it should be interesting to note some of the ways van Binsbergen approaches the field of African studies. The issue of witchcraft has had a checkered history in terms of the disciplinary spaces it has inhabited. In the main, the disciplines of anthropology and philosophy have been responsible for reiterating and sustaining the debates on African witchcraft. However a major conceptual break-through was made when

“Winch argued that African witchcraft, like any other religious beliefs the world over, comes in where knowledge (the knowledge of members of an African society, but also the knowledge of cosmopolitan natural sciences) runs out. African witchcraft is no more a theory of the natural world than that the Christian and Islamic dogma of Divine Providence is”.⁴⁹

In other words,

“African witchcraft is a way of speaking about the unspeakable”.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2001, ‘Witchcraft in modern Africa as virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order’, in : Bond, G.C., & Ciekawy, D.M., eds., *Witchcraft dialogues: Anthropological and philosophical exchanges*, pp. 212-263; also at: http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/witch.htm

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

For van Binsbergen,

“the study of witchcraft in Africa poses the same epistemological problems as any other attempt to study religious beliefs and practices with the concepts and theories which the social sciences have developed in the course of the twentieth century”.⁵¹

Another debunked anthropological and epistemological fallacy is the notion that “African historic societies “ (as van Binsbergen terms them) were “holistic, self-contained, bounded, integrated, locally anchored”. Paulin Hountondji and Kwame Appiah have done a lot to undermine this notion. And then van Binsbergen demonstrates how the virtualisation of human experience under contemporary globalisation has rendered previous explanatory models – in terms of the analyses of social formations and fissures – unsuitable.

A crucial problem facing various categories of populations in Africa today is how to forge and sustain new links of community in the face of daunting political and economic obstacles. Van Binsbergen centralises this problem in a way that forces us to reconsider what community means in its broader epistemological sense. From the practices of different African communities we are encouraged to believe it is a way of coping, and also a primal response to solitude. Hence the rationalisation of the processes of constructing community and solidarity need not always be intelligible. Thus

“healing cults, prophetic cults, anti-sorcery movements, varieties of imported world religions and local transformations thereof e.g. in the form of independent churches, struggles for political independence, involvement in modern natural politics including the recent wave of democratization, ethnicity, involvement in a peripheral-capitalist cash economy”.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.; also cf.: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1997, *Virtuality as a key concept in the study of globalisation: Aspects of the symbolic transformation of contemporary Africa*, The Hague: WOTRO [Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research, a division of the Netherlands Research Foundation NWO], Working papers on Globalisation and the construction of communal identity, 3; also at http://www.shikanda.net/general/virtuality_edit%202003.pdf

are all various African avenues for forging and maintaining community.

The village used to be a locus for community within the African context; however, with the advent of the virtual village, this is no longer the case. The

“elite (for whom patterns of consumerism replace the notion of community through media transmission and the display of appropriate manufactured symbols)”⁵³

seem to have found other meaningful ways of constructing community beyond the locus of the village.

However, in spite of the virtualisation of experience and the dissemination of discourses of modernity, the preoccupation with witchcraft has not diminished; rather, it has assumed other interesting forms. Van Binsbergen argues that aspects of witchcraft may be read as a theory of evil.⁵⁴ More explicitly:

Witchcraft is opposed to kinship, group solidarity, rules of kinship, incest prohibitions, avoidance rules concerning close kin, kinship obligations concerning redistribution of resources, the repression of intra-kin violence, and the acknowledgement of ancestral sanctions. Outside of the kinship order is the realm of witchcraft; and it is here that we must situate kinship, trade and the specialties of the bard, the diviner, the magician and the rain-maker.⁵⁵

Van Binsbergen breaks interesting theoretical grounds when he presents the thesis that witchcraft is an instance of virtuality. Witchcraft has moved from the “village” as a discursive terrain into the modern arena where

“many instances of competition over scarce resources, and many instances of the exercise of power”⁵⁶

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; also cf. van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1981, *Religious Change in Zambia: Exploratory studies*, London / Boston: Kegan Paul International; also as Google Book.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

have transformed it into a revised theory of evil. Thus

“witchcraft has offered modern Africans an idiom to articulate what otherwise could not be articulated: contradictions between power and meaning, between morality and primitive accumulation, between community and death, between community and the state.”⁵⁷

This reading of witchcraft, as a theory of evil and as an instance of virtuality offers discursive grounds for linking certain African primordial characteristics to the age of virtualisation. In spite of the hegemonic tendencies of global capitalism, theories of virtualisation alone cannot fully explain the complex amalgam of African realities. Furthermore, witchcraft as a theory of evil situated in the “village” cannot account for the discourses of modernity in which the African continent as a whole has become enmeshed. The recognition of these realities and the adoption of an appropriate assortment of theoretical strategies by van Binsbergen provide a large opening for the future of African studies.

His employment of subjects like religion, anthropology and witchcraft as fields for constructing and understanding human experience centralises what technologisation and digitalisation are always struggling to exclude. In that way, we are offered new ways of resistance, interpretation and perhaps also re-appropriation. Van Binsbergen describes his current research concerns thus:

“the articulation of philosophical problems of interculturality, and the suggestion of possible routes towards possible answers, specifically from the context of religion or, perhaps more generally, vaguely, and state-of-the-art-like, “spirituality”.”⁵⁸

Derrida’s work on religion merely re-establishes the centrality of issues

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Wim van Binsbergen, “Derrida on religion: Glimpses on interculturality” Paper presented at the Dutch-Flemish Association for Intercultural philosophy, Research group on Spirituality, meetings April and June, 2000; meanwhile published as: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2005, ‘Derrida on Religion: Glimpses of interculturality’, *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/ Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, XIX, No. 1-2, 2005: 129-152; full text at: http://www.quest-journal.net/QUEST_XIX/QUEST_XIX_binsbergen.pdf

concerning life, thought, truth, righteousness, sacrifice and violence in the history of ideas and action. Postmodernity, globalisation and the information age have not eroded their relevance. Thus if religion provides opportunities for constructing community it is not only imperative to study the source of such opportunities but also the complex of situations to which they give rise. Van Binsbergen claims religion allows people to create

“among themselves, a new social identity, a new community, which they would never have had without that religious expression; whilst creating a boundary between the chosen and the outside world. The diasporic religious situation seeks to efface boundaries among the chosen whatever their pre-existing differences in terms of class, gender, region, itinerary, age, etc.”⁵⁹

Furthermore,

“the alliance between Christianity, capitalism, and the scientific-technological complex of today”⁶⁰

provides methodological alternatives for the study of contemporary globalisation. These insights are what van Binsbergen’s work affords us.⁶¹ In addition, we are provided new tools for examining identity, belonging, place and homelessness. Van Binsbergen’s reading of Mudimbe locates the spaces of these questions in the latter’s work and within the larger field of African studies.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ See van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1991, 'Becoming a sangoma: Religious anthropological field-work in Francistown, Botswana', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 21, 4: 309-344; greatly revised version in: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2003, *Intercultural encounters: African and anthropological towards a philosophy of interculturality*, Berlin / Boston / Münster: LIT, chapter 5, pp. 155-193; also at: http://shikanda.net/intercultural_encounters/index.htm

Chapter 4. Conclusion

What we see in Mudimbe's project within the context of van Binsbergen's work and reading is that the former confronted by the sprawling spectre of exile and homelessness, withdraws behind the superstructure of the text. The text, fetishised beyond measure in the African consciousness, becomes an opaque sheet, the final severance from African body which Mudimbe with all seriousness had sought to appropriate.

There are ways in which to construct yet edifying forms of community within and outside the context of post-Fordism and the digital age. Van Binsbergen's work is a projection of some these modes of collective inclusion and strategies of self-inscription. We are also led to revisit the implications of these general ideas within the broader field of African studies.

African studies, which, it can be argued, is in part of a reaction to the hegemony of Eurocentricism and North Atlantic intellectual traditions, is structured and galvanised by elements of a largely by-gone metaphysical philosophy – the essence of Being, God, justice, the Enlightenment, and metanarrativity in general. Thus, its status ought to be defined within specific discursive geographies and specific locales. What does doing African studies as an African in the First World really mean? How do local peculiarities shape the field within the African continent itself? Practitioners of African studies are invariably compelled to admit that their positionalities and their different discursive contexts are provisional and contingent. Through the mere articulation of this echo, our techniques for discerning difference should become sharper.

Traditional specificities of place and belonging have been eroded by virtualisation. Van Binsbergen demonstrates this in relation to Mudimbe and by his own example. Place and belonging become what we make of them through constructs of meaning and also through the construction of community. The constructs of meaning and the construction of community are different and yet linked by the same sort of thematics: identity and post-identity politics, rootedness and alienation, text and context, contingency and universalism. Individual agency and chance as demonstrated by the separate yet related trajectories of Mudimbe and van Binsbergen reveal a lot about how we create forms of community, belonging and also modes of severance. Any reading of rootedness and belonging carries within it decisive instances of exclusion, and oftentimes it is these instances that give fuller pictures of our situationality.

In overturning Mudimbe's sense of place and belonging and in reaching beyond the African text into the African space, the African body, van Binsbergen finds a sense of community in the very continent where Mudimbe's concerns as they are currently constituted cannot reach.⁶²

⁶² See Wim van Binsbergen (ed.) 1997 *Black: Athena Ten Years After* Hoofddorp: Dutch Archaeological and Historical Society, Special issue, *Talanta: Proceedings of the Dutch Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 28-29, 1996-1997 – updated and expanded edition: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011, ed., *Black Athena comes of age: Towards a constructive re-assessment*, Berlin / Boston / Munster: LIT, fulltext of van Binsbergen's contributions to this collective volume also available from: <http://www.shikanda.net/topicalities/20102011.htm>. Originally, at this point I also referred to Wim van Binsbergen, *Global Bee Flight* (forthcoming); this abortive book draft (1998) has now been largely replaced by: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2010, 'The continuity of African and Eurasian mythologies: General theoretical models, and detailed comparative discussion of the case of Nkoya mythology from Zambia, South Central Africa', in: Wim M.J. van Binsbergen & Eric Venbrux, eds, *New Perspectives on Myth: Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, Ravenstein (the Netherlands), 19-21 August, 2008*, Haarlem: Papers in Intercultural Philosophy and Transcontinental Comparative Studies, pp. 143-225, fulltext also at: http://quest-journal.net/PIP/New_Perspectives_On_Myth_2010.

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