

## Reviews

**Nihilism and Negritude: Ways of Living in Africa** by CELESTIN MONGA

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. \$23.95 (pbk).

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*Nihilism and Negritude* succeeds in inducing laughter in a way books about Africa and philosophy are not supposed to. This is an elegant English translation from the French title published in 2009. Using as examples some lived experiences from Cameroon, Celestin Monga manages to tackle the hard epistemological and metaphysical questions about life in Africa and the diaspora while remaining playful in tone. The references are wide-ranging. Emil Cioran, Jean-Paul Sartre and Lao-Tzu are referenced side by side with Wole Soyinka, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga and Cornel West.

Carefully chosen vignettes drive the narrative and distinguish the approach here from the more common regrettable reduction of Africa in literature to merely setting and backdrop. African lived experiences frame the conceptualisation about knowledge and reality. The book has an introduction and conclusion, with six chapters between them. At the outset there is a clear definition of the key terms, negritude and nihilism. While the old negritude of the 1960s and the sibling Afrocentric and Black Consciousness movements were appeals for recognition of the humanity of Negro-Africans, they seemed to rest on nativist understandings of the black world that Monga rejects. Today's new negritude springs from an appreciation of our globalised world, its porous borders, and the resulting implications for identity. While Monga's assessment of negritude is fair, there is room for speculation about whether history has been unjust to Leopold Senghor in saddling him with a reputation for advocating a biologically determined epistemological stance. Senghor's idea of negritude on a careful reading is more nuanced and it would be more charitable to say that he was at best ambiguous about the role of biology in our attempts to apprehend the world. The contemporary mixing of cultures has simply compounded the urgency for updating and of working out what counts as commonality in the black world.

Here is indirect philosophy at its best, proceeding 'not by the presentation of a general theory and system of reasoning, but by details and sequences, in an often allusive manner' (p. 33). Each chapter is built around vignettes which focus on marriage, food, music, divine intervention in Africa, politics of the body, violence or death. Faced with responses to concrete African situations that would seem absurd or baffling to the inattentive observer, Monga teases out interpretations of nihilism in progress. Chapter 3 on the deeper meaning of dance and music makes the case that for diasporan Africans, dancing vigorously to the music of Lokua Kanza (for others it might be Tabu Ley Rochereau, Miriam Makeba or Angélique Kidjo) opens up new dimensions of time. In the words of the old Eagles song, some dance to

remember and others dance to forget. Music ‘becomes once more an object of philosophical speculation and a locus of exploration of the soul’s mysteries’ (p. 99). Even success in the west does not negate the hunger for community and for reconnection with tradition. Yet the frantic pace of contemporary life ensures that traditions themselves are in flux, hence the delicious irony of existential engagement with new traditions. Monga succeeds in capturing the humanity of Africans at home and abroad, deploying varieties of nihilistic strategies that simultaneously embody their psychology, language, religion, philosophy and culture. There is an ordinariness to these actions that would only seem exotic to the lazy.

Monga is clear-eyed in highlighting the incompetence, corruption, or civilian and official idiocy encountered in Africa as everywhere else. His analysis succeeds by walking a fine line between neither condoning nor fetishising these aspects of Africa. It is the ordinary responses to life’s absurdities that are instructive. An organic and implicit philosophy emerges, in essence a philosophy without philosophers since the practitioners feel no urge to offer any analysis. Monga’s insight is unlikely to win over the partisans of some of the best-known African philosophers, such as Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, H. Odera Oruka, Peter Bodunrin and D.A. Masolo who insist on systematic explication as a necessary condition for any philosophy. All factions should agree that the nihilistic postures invite reflection on the perennial philosophical question of what constitutes appearance and reality in Africa today.

Some readers may quibble about whether Monga oversells the talent of Lokua Kanza, or is unduly optimistic about African beauty standards being no longer tethered to western fashion capitals. Hyperbole and understatement are themselves tools for meaning-making. Any observers confounded by Africa may be looking in the wrong places for meaning. Monga’s vignettes and reflections should help shift the point of view. In the introduction he says about Kekem, a small town in Cameroon, ‘despite the beauty of the geography, the place is aggressively dreary. Amazing that everyone there isn’t depressed’ (p. 5). Making sense of Kekem is the key to making sense of Africa today.

SAM O. IMBO  
*Hamline University*

**Social Mobilisation and the Ebola Virus Disease in Liberia** by JOHN PERRY & T. DEBEY SAYNDEE

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Rather than solely analysing how social mobilisation brought an end to the Liberian Ebola outbreak, this book gives an overview of Liberia’s (pre)war and Ebola history, Ebola’s legacies, lessons learnt, and the unintended consequences of efforts to halt the virus. The outbreak was aggravated by inadequate health facilities, Ebola hoax rumours, widespread political distrust, cultural practices and a global top-down response that disrespected people’s wishes