

BOOK REVIEW

Célestin Monga. *Nihilism and Negritude: Ways of living in Africa*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 226 pp. Notes. Index. \$31.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-674-97072-4.

This academic monograph was originally published in French as *Nihilisme et négritude. Les arts de vivre en Afrique* by the Presses Universitaires de France in 2009. Madeleine Velguth is to be commended for her beautiful and elegant translation.

The author, Célestin Monga, worked thirteen years for the World Bank before joining the UN International Development Organization; he is currently vice president and chief economist of the African Development Bank, as well as visiting professor of economics at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and at Peking University. His father's cousin is the king of the Banas. Thanks to his diverse experiences, readings (he cites, among others: Emil Cioran, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Senghor, Achille Mbembe, Sony Labou Tansi, Fernando Pessoa, Jorge Luis Borges, Claude Levi Strauss, and Cornel West), and world travels, he has a broad perspective which informs his discussions. In the course of this volume, he addresses epistemological and metaphysical questions about everyday life in his native Cameroon as well as all across contemporary Africa and throughout the African diaspora.

In the introduction, Monga explains that there is a simplistic dichotomy which juxtaposes, on one hand the “‘structuralists,’ (progressives), who tend to infantilize the African peoples by finding external justifications for all the continent’s ills and, on the other hand, the scorn of the ‘culturalists’ (conservatives), who perceive them as communities permeated by a taste for sadomasochism and cynicism” (18). Both opposing groups have created and perpetuated misconceptions and stereotypes about African peoples. Monga aims to explore in this book “the philosophical substratum and patterns of reasoning concealed behind the most ordinary behaviors of daily life” (19). He uses nihilism to interpret those everyday life images, not a nihilism of despair but rather an active nihilism. He is interested in finding meaning and even joy in a life that would otherwise seem absurd. To him, today’s “new negritude” (25) springs from an appreciation of the globalized world, its porous borders, and the resulting implications with regard to identity. Writing

in clear and lucid, yet nuanced and sensitive, prose, his approach “comes down to imagining what certain ways of thinking and living bring to philosophy” (34).

The book is divided into six chapters, which are further subdivided into various sections. Each chapter is devoted to one particular aspect of human life in contemporary Africa and the diaspora. Monga guides the reader through his reflections step by step, using these various subdivisions. All titles and subtitles have been judiciously chosen. The first chapter, “Desire’s Ruses: Political Economy of Marriage,” places conjugality in its historical context. Its section “Memory of Oppression” (49–53) is particularly interesting, because it explains why for women their wardrobes are far more important than their sex life. The second chapter, “I Eat Therefore I Am,” concentrates on the philosophy of the table. In the third chapter, “Poetics of Movement: Visions of Dance and Music,” Monga shows, among other things, that for Africans of the diaspora, dancing vigorously to music opens up new dimensions of time.

The fourth chapter, “The Savor of Sin: Dialogue around God’s Funeral,” discusses his thoughts about religion. In Chapter Five, “Ethic of the Uses of the Body: A Theory of Self-Esteem,” Monga argues that the body “is not only the reflection of a state of self-awareness [but that it is] also the vehicle of the ambitions one harbors” (153). The last chapter, “Violence as Ethic of Evil,” demonstrates “how one can free oneself from violence in a world where it serves as sustenance for people who believe in nothing and expect nothing from life” (176); it also addresses how violence can be read as a “subtle form of nihilism” (186). The conclusion, “Nihilism to Tame Death,” is the most personal chapter, dealing as it does with the death and burial of Monga’s father.

This book, which integrates lived anecdotes from daily life with a philosophically inflected theoretical framework, is a fascinating meditation and also a challenging reflection. Monga offers the reader a more complete understanding of Africa and the Black world than is generally available in current literature. Through his exploration of ordinary behaviors, he defies superficial readings and stereotypes of African peoples, highlighting the importance and cultural interconnectedness of popular and sophisticated settings.

In sum, *Nihilism and Negritude: Ways of Living in Africa* is a thought-provoking book, comprehensive and instructive, that should be applauded for its originality. Thanks to its accessible style, it should appeal to a wide range of readers: specialists as well as undergraduate and graduate students in philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, and African studies, and anyone curious about contemporary African modernity. Every reputable library should own a copy of Monga’s engaging monograph.

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For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2017. "Africa from the Margins." *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 37–49. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.47.
- Jua, Nantang B. and Francis B. Nyamnjoh. 2002. "Scholarship Production in Cameroon: Interrogating a Recession." *African Studies Review* 45 (2): 49–71. doi:10.1017/S0002020600031425.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. 1985. "African Gnosis: Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge." *African Studies Review* 28 (2–3): 149–233. doi:10.2307/524605.