

Kabengele Munanga (author)

**Written by:** Clayton Guerreiro

**Translated by:** David Rodgers

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Kabengele Munanga was born in 1940, in Bakwa-Kalonji, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – the Belgian Congo at that time, until the independence in 1960. He graduated in social and cultural anthropology at the Official University of Congo, in 1969, becoming his country's first anthropologist. Munanga moved to São Paulo, Brazil, in 1975 and became a professor of anthropology at the University of São Paulo in 1980 until his retirement in 2012. He produced over 150 works throughout his career, including books, book chapters, and articles. His main research themes are racism, black identity, *negritude*, multiculturalism, education, ethnic-racial relations, and anti-racist policies in Brazil.

He began his graduate studies at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. At the start of his doctorate, the anthropologist focused his research on African arts. However, on returning to Congo for another period of fieldwork, he was politically persecuted by the dictatorship in power and prevented from returning to Belgium, forcing him to interrupt his doctorate. Invited to come to Brazil in 1975, Munanga defended his dissertation at the University of São Paulo (USP) in 1977, called *Os Basanga de Shaba: um grupo étnico do Zaire. Ensaio de antropologia geral* [The Basanga of Shaba: an ethnic group from Zaire. An essay in general anthropology]. It is a classic monograph examining themes like kinship system, religion, and economy. Despite the functionalist traces that reveal the influence of his supervisor Theodor Theuws, a former student of Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), the work has the merit of showing how the colonial situation influenced the way of life of Basanga society.

In Brazil, he was a visiting professor at the São Paulo School of Sociology and Politics and the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, before finally joining the

University of São Paulo (1980-2012). At USP, he worked as a professor at the Department of Anthropology and directed the Center of African Studies (2006-2010). In addition, he was director of the [Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology \(MAE\)](#) (1983-1989) and vice-director of the Contemporary Art Museum (MAC) (2002-2006) – both institutions are part of the University of São Paulo. In 2023, he was conferred the title of professor emeritus from the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences (FFLCH).

The racism and discrimination experienced by Munanga in Brazil would definitively mark his production, influencing his decision to study ethnic-racial issues in the country, engaging intensively in discussions on topics like *negritude* ('blackness'), miscegenation, racism, and education. On these themes, he published, among other works, *Negritude: Usos e Sentidos* [Blackness: uses and meanings] (1998) and *Rediscutindo a mestiçagem no Brasil* [Rediscussing miscegenation in Brazil] (1999). In the former, the author sets out from the concept of *negritude*, referring to the Afro-French-Caribbean literary movement of *Négritude*, begun in the 1930s by the writers and politicians Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) from Martinique, in the Caribbean, Leopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001) from Senegal, and Léon-Gontran Damas (1912-1978) from the French Guiana. These authors argued that the notion of *négritude* should be used to challenge colonialism and Eurocentrism, proposing the valorization of traditional African cultures and the affirmation of black identity. For Césaire, especially, *négritude* rested on the recognition of blackness and the understanding of African history and culture. Munanga revisited this discussion and recalled that, for the Martinican author, *négritude* was related to the three categories that formed the black African cultural personality: identity, fidelity, and solidarity. While identity was related to the pride in being black; fidelity corresponded to the connection to the 'motherland' (Africa); and solidarity to the feeling that linked "all the black brothers and sisters of the world."

In mobilizing the category, Munanga undertook a historical-anthropological survey of the colonial conditions that had resulted in the emergence of the notion of 'race.' As the author recalls, the Europeans both invented racism with the support of

pseudoscientific premises and produced social hierarchies to dehumanize black people and place the ‘white race’ at the top of the civilizational pyramid. Racialized and dehumanized, Africans and their descendants were left with the sole option of assimilating the customs and ideas of the white dominator, even though this assimilation would never place them on a fully equal footing. The concept of *negritude* thus appears as a political and epistemological tool that presumes a double movement: a refusal to adopt white customs and a decision to consciously adopt a posture of solidarity with the black identity and race, giving these new meanings by valorizing African cultures and challenging Eurocentrism. Although the category of race has no scientific foundation in any biological sense, Munanga argues for the term’s sociological utility. Stripped of its colonial traits, the concept can collaborate in valorizing the black identity and *negritude* as tools to counter racism.

Another central discussion for Munanga concerns the configurations of miscegenation in Brazil. In *Rediscutindo a mestiçagem no Brasil* [Rediscussing miscegenation in Brazil] (1999), he analyses how the category was conceived as a pivotal element in Brazilian identity and used to crystallize a supposed white superiority. Unlike regimes where racial segregation was legalized, as in the United States and South Africa, the idea of miscegenation helped camouflage structural racism in Brazil. He also shows how Brazilian intellectuals like Silvio Romero (1851-1914) and Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987), author of the 1933 work *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*), by taking miscegenation as a central trait of Brazilian national identity, ended up obscuring racism. Opposing their approach, Munanga dialogues with theoreticians and activists of the black movement, like the artist and dramatist Abdias Nascimento (1914-2011), and recalls that Brazilian miscegenation resulted from violent historical processes that sought to erase the legacies of the African population and their descendants from the nation’s history.

Munanga has participated actively in the public debate on black identity and the conditions of the Afro-descendant population in Brazil. Like other intellectuals and activists, he has been an enthusiastic advocate of initiatives such as compulsory teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian culture at all levels of education (Brazilian

Law 10.639/2003) and affirmative action policies; he considers these initiatives to be tools for valuing black identity and racial diversity and for confronting racism. Socially and politically engaged, Munanga's work is situated in the border zone between the anthropology of Afro-Brazilian populations and the education of ethnic-racial relations, and proposes fundamental dialogues between anthropology, history, and education. A good example of his contributions to the education of ethnic-racial relations is the collection *Superando o racismo na escola* [Overcoming racism in schools] (1999). The work suggests pedagogical practices to combat racism and the valuing of racial diversity in the classroom, deconstructing stereotypes about the black population and valuing Afro-Brazilian traditions.

Although not developing new analytic categories to reflect on the reality of African populations in the diaspora, the author has reworked, historicized, and reinterpreted anthropological categories like race, blackness, and black identity. These concepts have shown to be powerful theoretical tools for anti-racist activism, public debate, and education while continuing to provide theoretical support for the training of anthropologists, historians, and educators.

**Editor's note:** In English, Munanga published the entry “African studies outside Africa: Latin America” in the *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara* (1997). In French, he published more extensively, including “A propos de la fonction de l'art plastique en Afrique Noire” (1974), “Du blanchissement à la négritude: La dialectique de la question raciale brésilienne” (1983), “Art africain et syncrétisme religieux au Brésil” (1989), “Mutation de savoirs et postcolonialité. L'anthropologie et les militants universitaires noirs au Brésil” (2009), “L'anthropologie au Brésil et les limites de l'hégémonie occidentale”, and “Résistances identitaires et religieuses dans les luttes et la vie des afro-brésiliens” (2014).

## HOW TO CITE

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## KEYWORDS

black diaspora; black intellectuals; Brazilian anthropology; Brazilian social sciences; education; Negritude; race

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