

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

**AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY, MYTH AND REALITY: A CONVERSATION WITH PAULIN
HOUNTONDJI**

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Abstract

In this article, we converse with Paulin Hountondji's work titled *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, published in *African System of Thought*, edited by Charles S. Bird and Ivan Karp, Indiana University Press. We articulate the major contributions of the author to African philosophy and critically engage with his ideas in order to open new vistas of thought. Our duty as conversationalists is, first, to articulate his idea of African philosophy as myth, which includes (i) cultural philosophy, (ii) primitive unanimity and collective philosophy, and (iii) Ethnophilosophy; second, to examine his idea of African philosophy as reality, which includes a thorough assessment of (i) the content and (ii) the criterion of African philosophy. We then evaluate the strengths and limitations of Hountondji's position against the wider literature before concluding that what Hountondji calls myth in African philosophy in fact forms the foundational background of African philosophy.

Keywords: *Paulin Hountondji, African philosophy, Ethnophilosophy, primitive unanimity*

Introduction

With the conclusion of the great debate about the existence of African philosophy, the wheel of philosophical inquiry continues to turn. Subsequent debates include, first, the language question in African philosophy, championed by scholars such as Ogunmodede (1998), Azenabor (1998), Uduagwu (2017, 2022), Bello (1987, 2004, 2014), and Tangwa (1992, 2017). Second is the problem of method in African philosophy, addressed by scholars such as Mudimbe (1988), Asouzu (2004), Oyowe (2017), Makwinja (2018), and Chimakonam (2019). Third is the question of Ethnophilosophy as a form of non-philosophy, raised by scholars such as Hountondji (1996), Attoe (2016), and Bodunrin (1991). These issues in the history of African philosophy have generated an enduring argument between Universalists and Particularists. In this article, however, we focus on Ethnophilosophy, which Hountondji identifies as one myth among several in African philosophy, in order to show the role Ethnophilosophy plays in African philosophical discourse.

The debate remains active in contemporary African philosophy. During the period of the great debate, several trends — Ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy, sage philosophy, hermeneutics, and the artistic/literary trend (Oruka, "Four Trends," 47–62; Chimakonam; Ogbonnaya) — were articulated to demonstrate the existence of an African philosophical tradition. Ethnophilosophy, however, remains the trend that occupies the central stage whenever the question of the proper philosophical orientation of African philosophy arises. Ethnophilosophy, a term coined by Hountondji, is nonetheless regarded by him as a myth in African philosophy: for Hountondji, Ethnophilosophy is

mythical with respect to what African philosophy ought to be. We discuss this claim in detail in the next section.

Our aims in this article are, first, to articulate Hountondji's account of myth in African philosophy and to critically engage and reconstruct its mythical dimension; and second, to present Hountondji's standpoint on what makes African philosophy a reality. As a conversationalist and an ambassador of the Conversational School of Philosophy (CSP), it is our duty to critically yet creatively engage the existing positions of seasoned and emerging African philosophers (Uduagwu 2019: 34). The Conversational School understands philosophical progress as the product of sustained dialogue across positions rather than the unilateral pronouncement of a single school; in this spirit, we treat Hountondji neither as an authority to be deferred to nor as an opponent to be dismissed, but as an interlocutor whose claims merit careful reconstruction before they are assessed. We subject Hountondji's essay here to the test of conversational philosophy. To this end, the article is organized as follows. The introduction outlines what the article sets out to achieve. The second section articulates what Hountondji means by myth in African philosophy. The third section presents what Hountondji regards as the reality of African philosophy. The fourth section evaluates Hountondji's position in light of the wider debate, before the conclusion draws the threads of the argument together.

Hountondji on African Philosophy as Myth

In this section, we itemize and discuss what Hountondji calls myth in African philosophy. For Hountondji, much of what some African philosophers take themselves to be discussing as the content of African philosophy is, in fact, mythical. These myths include: (i) the idea of a cultural philosophy, (ii) primitive unanimity and collective philosophy, and (iii) Ethnophilosophy.

For Hountondji, the idea of a cultural philosophy is itself a myth. He argues that to assume cultural identity lies in philosophy is mistaken. In Hountondji's words, there is "the underlying idea that one of the elements of the cultural identity is precisely 'philosophy,' the idea that every culture rests on a specific, permanent, metaphysical substratum" (1996: 60). The implication of this claim is that culture, on Hountondji's view, has nothing essential to do with philosophy, and that one cannot legitimately attach culture to philosophy. If this is the case, however, what then forms the foundation or identity of any particular philosophy? What differentiates one philosophical tradition from another? On the first question, we contend that Hountondji underestimates the foundational role of culture, since no philosophy exists in a vacuum. It is important to note that individuals who philosophize always think from within a particular cultural background before communicating their thought to the wider philosophical world. Culture, therefore, forms the basis of all philosophical thinking, whether Western, African, or otherwise. In support of this, Olukayode Adesuyi argues that culture "serve[s] as a relevant source for the discussion on African philosophy" (2014: 83). Chukwueloka Uduagwu similarly argues that the criterion for African philosophy should be the questioning of cultural experience within any given philosophical tradition (2019: 34). Cultural ideas thus play a foundational role in philosophy generally, a role that Hountondji dismisses as myth in the specific case of African philosophy.

What, then, differentiates one philosophy from another, if not culture? Philosophy, according to Kwame Gyekye, is a cultural phenomenon, since its principal root and source are grounded in cultural experience (1987: x). Olusegun Oladipo shares this view, explaining that philosophy is a "social phenomenon which derives its being from the experience generated through the continuous

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interaction between human beings and their environment and between themselves" (2000: 25). Uduma Oji makes the point still more directly: "what makes a philosophy African, Western or Oriental is the cultural background it is excavated from, the cultural background it reacts to, the cultural background that provides the material object for philosophizing" (2014: 142). Culture, on this reading, is an essential constituent of philosophy as such, and African philosophy is no exception.

A second item that Hountondji classifies as myth in African philosophy is "primitive unanimity and collective philosophy." For Hountondji, the idea of unanimity and collective philosophy is mythical because it rests on the assumption that, in non-Western societies, everyone simply agrees with everyone else — that thought in such societies is never individual belief but only a collective system of belief. On Hountondji's view, a thought that cannot be traced to a specific individual thinker, as in the Western philosophical tradition, does not qualify as philosophy; it is, at best, myth. This view, we argue, overlooks the communitarian character of traditional African society, in which adult members of a community routinely deliberate together on matters affecting the community and arrive at solutions that, in turn, become the operative philosophy of the people. Bernard Matolino (2018) describes this process as "consensus democracy." That a thought is arrived at collectively does not, by itself, render it myth; rather, it identifies the social process through which the philosophy of that community takes root and is transmitted.

Finally, Hountondji argues that Ethnophilosophy itself is a myth in African philosophy. On his account, what many African philosophers regard as African philosophy is, in reality, a cultural worldview that he terms Ethnophilosophy. Aribiah Attoe, in support of Hountondji, contends that "it is a myth that Ethnophilosophy serves as a veritable foundation to authentic African philosophy" (2016: 100). For Attoe, African philosophy should instead build its foundation on criticality rather than on Ethnophilosophy. This raises an obvious question: if African philosophy is to build its foundation on criticality, what then is the foundation of criticality itself? Lucky Uchenna Ogbonnaya offers a response, arguing that "criticality is a philosophical tool among other tools and that [a] philosophical tool cannot be the foundation of philosophizing" (2019: 122). We are inclined to agree, and would go further: it is more defensible to build the foundation of African philosophy on Ethnophilosophy, with critical reflection then applied to that foundation in order for it to be properly philosophical. Scholars such as Fainos Mangena and Ada Agada have likewise argued that Ethnophilosophy plays a foundational role in African philosophy precisely by being subjected to criticality.

Hountondji's characterization of Ethnophilosophy as myth has given rise to three broad orientations in the subsequent literature: the Particularist orientation, the Universalist orientation, and the Foundationalist orientation. The Particularist orientation regards Ethnophilosophy as African philosophy proper (Tempels 1959; Senghor 1956, 1962; Mbiti 1969; Mangena 2014a, 2014b). The Universalist orientation holds that Ethnophilosophy is not African philosophy but mere myth (Bodunrin 1991; Oruka 1991; Wiredu 1991; Hountondji 1996; Attoe 2016). The Foundationalist orientation argues that Ethnophilosophy, whatever its limitations, is at the foundation of African philosophy (Agada 2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b, 2019; Ogbonnaya 2018a, 2018b). Three scholars in particular — Ada Agada, Aribiah Attoe, and Lucky Ogbonnaya — have undertaken a sustained critical and creative engagement with this third orientation, an engagement that eventually produced a seven-author article published in *Filosofia Theoretica* and later republished in an edited anthology titled *Ethnophilosophy and the Search for the Wellspring of African Philosophy*. It is our contention, in line with the Foundationalist orientation, that Ethnophilosophy is not a myth in African philosophy but rather serves as its foundation. Ethnophilosophy, in other words, plays a foundational role in

African philosophy, and it is the task of African philosophers to apply the critical tools of philosophy to this foundation in order to render it properly philosophical.

Hountondji on African Philosophy as Reality

Having dissected what Hountondji refers to as myth in African philosophy, and having argued that what he calls myth is, in fact, the raw material and foundation on which critical reflection should be exercised, we turn in this section to what Hountondji describes as the reality of African philosophy. He identifies two basic markers of this reality: the philosophical content of African philosophy and its criterion.

Hountondji holds that the content of African philosophy is a reality, though he does not himself specify what that content consists in — a question he leaves largely unaddressed. If a body of thought is to represent a particular group, it must, at minimum, reflect that group's ideas and culture. Tsenay Serequeberhan agrees with Hountondji that the content of African philosophy is a reality, but goes further by insisting that this content should concern issues specific to Africans and the worldview of African peoples; he stresses that the content of African philosophy must be concretely engaged with the contemporary lived concerns and problems of Africans (1991: xix). Barry Hallen likewise argues that cultural background and the African system of belief should constitute the content of African philosophy (2018: 35).

Hountondji also holds that there is a determinate criterion for African philosophy, though, again, he does not articulate what that criterion is. This omission has generated what is now known in the literature as the criteria question in African philosophy, addressed by scholars such as Hountondji (1996), Orika (1975), Bodunrin (1991), Onyewuenyi (1991), Uduma (2014), Chimakonam (2015a, 2015b), and Ogbonnaya (2018a), who argue that the criterion of a philosophy is precisely what makes that philosophy distinctive. Henry Odera Orika, addressing the criteria question directly, proposes that African philosophy be understood as "a work of an African thinker or philosopher that deals with a specific African issue, formulated by an indigenous African thinker or by a thinker versed in African culture and intellectual life" (1975: 50). Peter Bodunrin offers a related criterion, describing African philosophy as a work written by any philosopher or group of philosophers concerned with African issues, interested in Africa, employing an African viewpoint, and residing in Africa (1991: 72). Bodunrin raises further unresolved questions: What exactly are African philosophers trying to do? What challenges are they trying to meet? What would constitute an appropriate answer to the problems African philosophers are attempting to solve? (1991: 65–66).

Ogbonnaya, drawing on Sophie Oluwale and T. Uzodinma Nwala, argues that for any discourse to qualify as African philosophy, it must bear the stamp of African originality (2018a: 118). Nwala ties this originality to the African worldview, while Oluwale links it to a native African cultural identity (Ogbonnaya 2018a: 118). On the same criteria question, Uduma Oji argues that for a discourse to count as African philosophy, it must be located within the cultural and geographical background of philosophizing, as well as grounded in African experience and the African world (2014: 143). Innocent Onyewuenyi proposes "communitarian ontology" as the relevant criterion — a position later termed the "communitarian ontology criterion" (Chimakonam 2015b: 42) — explaining that communitarian ontology is the bedrock against which any discourse must be measured if it is to pass as African philosophy. Scholars such as William Abraham and John Mbiti share this view.

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Jonathan Chimakonam advances a different criterion, which he calls the "logic criterion." This criterion builds on Oruka's clause that a discourse can qualify as African philosophy whether authored by an African or a non-African, and whether concerned with an African or non-African issue, provided it is capable of universal application and is produced against the background logic of African ontology, or what Chimakonam calls "the instrument of [the] logic tradition in Africa," which he characterizes as dialectical in structure (2015b: 45). Chimakonam further argues that logic, in philosophy, conveys a method of philosophizing, and that different philosophical traditions represent different ways of studying reality; philosophy, on this account, is philosophy because it is the custodian of the particular logic that defines it (2015b: 110). Ogbonnaya, in a related vein, holds that ontology is the science of reality, which logic and philosophy together seek to understand and explain (2018a: 122).

Ontology, on this view, becomes a candidate criterion for African philosophy, alongside its logic. Uduagwu, however, contends that culture is itself the by-product of ontology, such that ontology is informed by culture rather than the reverse (2022: 34). On this account, ontology is only realized once we question and interrogate cultural experience; "questioning cultural experience" thereby becomes the yardstick for defining or shaping a philosophy and its underlying ontology. If we fail to question these cultural experiences, we remain at the level of mere Ethnophilosophy, and the achievement of a genuine ontology becomes correspondingly difficult; it is precisely through the questioning of cultural experience that the ontology of any group of people comes to be realized (Uduagwu 2022: 34). Culture, on this reading, forms the background of ontology, and ontology cannot itself serve as the ultimate criterion for African philosophy; rather, "questioning cultural experience" is the more fundamental criterion (Uduagwu 2022: 34). This, we contend, is what Hountondji means by the reality of African philosophy, even where he himself leaves the relevant criteria unspecified.

It is worth pausing on the asymmetry already visible at this stage between Hountondji's two halves. Where his treatment of myth is detailed, itemized, and argued at length — cultural philosophy, primitive unanimity, and Ethnophilosophy are each named, defined, and defended as mythical in turn — his treatment of reality is comparatively thin. He asserts that content and criterion are realities of African philosophy, but the substantive labor of saying what that content and criterion actually are is left almost entirely to the generation of scholars who followed him: Oruka, Bodunrin, Onyewuenyi, Uduma, Chimakonam, and Ogbonnaya, among others. This asymmetry is not merely a stylistic feature of Hountondji's essay; it bears directly on how persuasive his myth/reality distinction can ultimately be, a point to which we return in the Evaluation below.

Evaluation

Having reconstructed both Hountondji's account of myth and his account of reality in African philosophy, we turn now to an evaluation of his overall position, its strengths, and its limitations.

The principal strength of Hountondji's intervention lies in its insistence on rigor. Hountondji writes against a background in which colonial anthropology and certain early African nationalist thought had collapsed the distinction between worldview and philosophy, treating any documented African belief system as ipso facto a philosophical achievement. Works such as Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy* (1959) exemplify the tendency Hountondji is reacting against: a European missionary's reconstruction of an implicit Bantu metaphysics, presented as the collective philosophy of a people

who were not themselves consulted as individual thinkers and who did not author the text in question. Hountondji's demand that philosophy be traceable to an identifiable thinker, defended through argument and open to critical scrutiny, is a salutary corrective to this earlier tendency. It is also worth noting, in fairness to Hountondji, that his target is narrower than is sometimes assumed: he does not deny that Africans have worldviews, cultures, or systems of belief; he denies only that the mere existence of such systems amounts to philosophy in the disciplined, individually authored, argumentative sense he has in mind. This distinction is philosophically serious and cannot simply be dismissed as Eurocentric prejudice, even by those, like the present authors, who ultimately reject its conclusion.

That said, Hountondji's position faces several difficulties, three of which we consider most significant.

The first difficulty concerns the implicit double standard in his treatment of culture and philosophy. Hountondji insists that philosophy must be severed from culture if Ethnophilosophy is to be exposed as myth, yet the historiography of Western philosophy itself routinely treats culture as constitutive of philosophical traditions: one speaks unproblematically of "Greek philosophy," "German idealism," or "British empiricism" as traditions shaped by their cultural and linguistic settings, without thereby disqualifying them as philosophy. If cultural specificity does not disqualify Kant from being a philosopher working within a German intellectual culture, it is unclear why cultural specificity should disqualify African thought from philosophical status. As Gyekye (1987: x) and Oladipo (2000: 25) argue, philosophy in general — not merely African philosophy — is a cultural and social phenomenon. Hountondji's myth of cultural philosophy, on this reading, is not a myth particular to Africa but a feature of philosophical practice as such, one that he applies selectively.

The second difficulty concerns the individualism built into Hountondji's criterion of authorship. By requiring that philosophy be traceable to a single, identifiable individual, Hountondji adopts a historically and culturally specific model of authorship — one associated with the post-Enlightenment European academy — and projects it as a universal criterion of what philosophy must be. Yet collective deliberation of the kind described by Matolino's "consensus democracy" (2018) need not be philosophically inert; a community's capacity to deliberate, weigh reasons, and arrive at a shared position is itself a form of reasoning, even if it does not terminate in a single named author. The relevant question, we suggest, is not whether a thought has an individual author, but whether it was arrived at through a process answerable to reasons and open to revision. Collective deliberation can satisfy this condition as well as solitary authorship can; Hountondji's criterion conflates a contingent fact about how Western philosophy has typically been produced and transmitted with a necessary condition for philosophy as such.

The third, and in our view most consequential, difficulty concerns the constructive vacuum that follows from Hountondji's negative project. Hountondji is considerably more confident in saying what African philosophy is not than in saying what it is. As we noted above, he asserts that the content and criterion of African philosophy are realities, yet he does not specify either with any precision. This leaves later scholars — Oruka, Bodunrin, Onyewuenyi, Uduma, Chimakonam, Ogbonnaya, and others — to do the constructive work that Hountondji's framework presupposes but does not itself supply. It is telling that nearly every subsequent attempt to specify a criterion for African philosophy (communitarian ontology, the logic criterion, the African-originality criterion, the questioning-cultural-experience criterion) returns, in one way or another, to precisely the cultural and communal materials that Hountondji had dismissed as myth. This recurrence suggests that

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Hountondji's myths are not eliminable false starts but unavoidable raw material: one cannot ask what is distinctively African about African philosophy's content without eventually appealing to African cultural experience, the very thing Hountondji's "myth of cultural philosophy" sets out to deny any philosophical standing.

There is, in addition, a methodological irony worth registering. Hountondji's own critique of Ethnophilosophy is itself a piece of conceptual analysis applied to a body of African intellectual production; in subjecting Ethnophilosophy to philosophical scrutiny, he performs precisely the kind of critical operation that the Foundationalist orientation (Agada, Attie, Ogbonnaya) recommends should be performed on Ethnophilosophy rather than used to dismiss it outright. Hountondji's own practice, in other words, looks less like a wholesale rejection of Ethnophilosophic material and more like an instance of applying criticality to that material — which is exactly the Foundationalist proposal we have defended above. On this reading, Hountondji and his Foundationalist successors disagree less about method than about how to describe what that shared method yields: Hountondji calls the pre-critical material myth and treats its philosophical worth as exhausted once exposed; the Foundationalists call the same material foundation and treat its philosophical worth as only beginning once exposed to criticality.

A fourth point, related to but distinct from the three considered above, concerns the asymmetry between Hountondji's treatment of "myth" and his treatment of "reality." Throughout *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Hountondji writes as though myth and reality were two separate compartments of African philosophical discourse, the one to be discarded and the other to be retained. Yet his own account of reality — the content and criterion of African philosophy — turns out, on inspection, to presuppose precisely the cultural and communal material he assigns to myth. If, as Serequeberhan (1991: xix) and Hallen (2018: 35) argue, the content of African philosophy must engage the lived concerns and cultural background of Africans, then content and myth are not, after all, cleanly separable categories; the content Hountondji wants to preserve as real is continuous with, rather than opposed to, the cultural philosophy he wants to dismiss as myth. The boundary between the two compartments, in other words, is far less stable than Hountondji's own architecture suggests, and this instability is itself evidence that the myth/reality distinction, however useful as a rhetorical device for clearing away uncritical Ethnophilosophy, cannot do the further work of telling us what African philosophy positively consists in.

A fifth consideration concerns the comparative dimension of Hountondji's argument, which is sometimes obscured by the way the debate has subsequently been framed. Hountondji's deeper worry is not, in fact, that African thought is collective or culturally embedded as such; it is that treating any and every collectively held worldview as automatically philosophical would make the category of philosophy vacuous, applicable to all human cultures indiscriminately and therefore explanatorily empty. This is a legitimate methodological worry, and one that Universalists such as Wiredu (1991) and Oruka (1991) share. Where Hountondji's argument overreaches, in our view, is not in raising this worry but in concluding that the only available remedy is to sever culture from philosophy altogether, rather than to specify more precisely which features of cultural and communal thought rise to the level of philosophical reflection and which do not. The Foundationalist orientation, and the questioning-cultural-experience criterion proposed by Uduagwu (2022: 34), can be read as an attempt to supply exactly this more precise specification: not every cultural belief is philosophy, but a cultural belief that has been subjected to sustained questioning, and thereby transformed into a reasoned position open to challenge and revision, has earned philosophical status. This response

preserves Hountondji's legitimate worry about vacuity while rejecting his more drastic conclusion that culture itself must be evacuated from the definition of philosophy.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that Hountondji's contribution is best understood not as a definitive verdict on African philosophy, but as a necessary and clarifying provocation — one that forced subsequent scholarship to be far more self-conscious about the difference between describing a worldview and constructing a philosophy. His diagnosis of certain confusions in early African philosophical writing remains largely sound, and his insistence on argumentative rigor has had a lasting and beneficial disciplinary effect. His prescription, however — that the cultural, communal, and Ethnophilosophic materials he identifies should therefore be discarded as myth — does not follow from his own diagnosis, and is not borne out by the subsequent history of the field, which has instead built directly and productively upon those very materials. The history of African philosophy after Hountondji reads, in this sense, less like a vindication of his myth/reality dichotomy and more like a sustained, collective demonstration that his myths were never disposable in the first place.

Conclusion

Our aim in this inquiry has been to explore Hountondji's position on the myth and reality of African philosophy. We began with a conversation with Hountondji on what he terms myth in African philosophy, arguing that what he so designates — the idea of a cultural philosophy, primitive unanimity and collective philosophy, and Ethnophilosophy — in fact plays a foundational role in African philosophy. We then presented what Hountondji terms the reality of African philosophy, namely the content of African philosophy and its criterion. In the Evaluation, we argued that Hountondji's demand for rigor is a genuine and lasting contribution to the field, but that his sharp separation of culture from philosophy, his individualist criterion of authorship, and the constructive vacuum left by his unspecified criteria are each open to serious challenge, and that the subsequent literature has, in practice, vindicated the Foundationalist reading of Ethnophilosophy over Hountondji's own. We conclude, accordingly, that what Hountondji terms reality in African philosophy is indeed a reality, but that what he terms myth in African philosophy is not myth in the dismissive sense he intends; it is, rather, the foundational background out of which African philosophy, properly subjected to critical reflection, is built.

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