

**A CONTEMPORARY APPRAISAL OF PAULIN HOUNTONDJI'S CRITIQUE OF
ETHNOPHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

In the attempt to disclaim the ideology of the western scholars that Africans have no philosophy, many thinkers in Africa towed the way paved by the *Bantu philosophy* of Placid Tempels to provide what they considered as African philosophy. This necessitated the coining and bringing of the concept Ethnophilosophy into the African philosophic context. It was a terminology that dates back to Kwame Nkrumah but popularized by Paulin Hountondji. Thus, the concept 'Ethnophilosophy' is one of the trends or dimensions identified in African philosophy by one of the leading African philosophers – Odera Oruka. In his idea of ethnophilosophy, culture represents those enterprises that deal with the collective world view of a particular people (Africa). Hountondji in his philosophical enterprise could not accept the works of the earlier postulators of an Africa philosophy. He had series of critics on their work. Finally, he summed the whole work to be ethnophilosophy because, they represent the collective world view of a particular people against what philosophy posits in the actual sense. Hountondji went further to critique ethnophilosophy of lack of a method, non-African orientation and unable to be in a written form, being a collective world view and of non-scientific orientation that are the five main ways he registered his discontent.

Keywords: *Ethnophilosophy, African philosophy, Ethnophilosophers, Bantu Philosophy*

Introduction

The submission that Africans cannot reason into abstract things presuppose the denial of an authentic and independent African philosophy. In the light of this assertion, many Western thinkers had posited that Africans are primitive and as such cannot have philosophy and even if they do have, it must be one that pays allegiance to the Western thought. Hence, many African intellectuals have risen from their slumber to disclaim this Western misconception about Africa. Many of them like Odera Oruka, Senghor, Nyerere, Hountondji and others have written extensively to provide evidence that Africans have philosophy that is devoid of the Western thought as a climbing lather. Be that as it may, it happen that, some of the texts presented by some African thinkers as African philosophy were summed up under the term 'Ethnophilosophy' by Paulin Hountondji.

For him, what the early philosophers presented as African philosophy was never African philosophy but ethnophilosophy since their findings was out of the discovery made by the Western missionaries and anthropologists as a historical work rather than from African philosophers and from an African background. By so doing, what the missionaries presented is not African philosophy but they were philosophizing on the collective world view of a particular people of Africa as seen in Tempels

Bantu Philosophy and Kagame's *Rwandan Philosophy*. This particular presentation is what Hountondji seek to refute in order to help African philosophers arrive at a philosophy that is independent of the western thought and is African.

In this work therefore, the intent is an understanding of ethnophilosophy and its critique in Paulin Hountondji. In order to arrive at a comprehensive structure of the whole enterprise, this work is divided into five main sections. As the abstract and introduction takes care of the first section, section two handles the explication of term where we shall explain what ethnophilosophy entails as well as giving a short biography of the Beninese African contemporary philosopher Paulin Hountondji. Section three is all about Hountondji's idea of an African philosophy/ethnophilosophy. Section four discusses Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy, and finally, section five sees to the evaluation and conclusion of the whole enterprise.

Ethnophilosophy

Among the four trends of African philosophy, Oruka identified ethnophilosophy as one of them. This concept 'Ethnophilosophy' is identified as one of the fundamental problems facing an authentic African philosophy. It is a concept that Hountondji vehemently rejected to be ascribed as philosophy talk of elevating and bringing it in into the world of African philosophy. When Oruka was describing its nature as a trend in African philosophy, it can be observed that, the concept only refers to the concepts that are found among the African people of which are picked by some African thinkers/philosophers and present them in a collective world view manner thereby pronouncing them philosophy. Hence, some African scholars simply singled out and label the cultural heritage of a people as philosophy. Many African philosophers with regards to this ethnophilosophic expression have their light cast upon this concept and as such must have said one thing about it. In that case, some of their submissions we will consider.

More so, etymologically, ethnophilosophy is a derivation of two words: '*Ethnos*,' and '*Philosophia*.' *Ethnos* in the Greek context connotes with nation, people, tribe, etc and *philosophia* is the coming together of the two Greek words: *Philos* and *Sophia* to mean love of wisdom. As the name rightly applies, *philosophia* tries to engage man in reasoning with respect to his socio-cultural environment as well as other realities that man encounters as a living, knowing, and speech making being. With the etymological representation, it follows then that; ethnophilosophy is "the tribal, communal response, cultural view or customary critical view of a people"(Onebunne, 2020:9). Be that as it may, the word ethnophilosophy was first found in the autobiography of one of the leading African philosophers – Kwame Nkrumah who said he registered for a Doctorate degree in the course-ethnophilosophy. This is what necessitated the coining and popularization of the word by Paulin Hountondji out of his view that the concept deals with the coming together of two other concepts - ethnography and philosophy.

Ethnophilosophy however, can neither be regarded as a branch of philosophy nor of any philosophical tradition of an applied philosophy. It can only be understood in the context of a philosophical tradition of a particular people that is African inclined in as much as its origin and practice is concerned. However, we must understand that whatever is that surrounds a people always be the major source of their point of departure while engaging in philosophy. This was why the birth place of western philosophy remains Ionia in Greece with Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximanes as the forerunners. This implies that, ethnophilosophy cuts across many world known philosophical traditions be it western, Chinese, and even ancient African (Egyptian) philosophical tradition. Hence,

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the main point here is that, even though there are standardized philosophical traditions today, there is every possibility that they must have started from a background that is ethnophilosophically inclined.

In this regard, one cannot deny the presence of ethnophilosophy in African philosophy. But the problem that Hountondji have with African philosophy (especially the early texts) is that, African philosophers try to develop their philosophy from an account rendered by a foreigner that abstracted a particular world view of the Africans (Bantu in precise) and presented it as an African philosophy. In his submission, Onebunne citing Hountondji (2020:10) asserts that, “Bantu Philosophy and the likes are myths that have to be definitively destroyed if real philosophy can ever take root in Africa.” Therefore, in the quest to cast light upon the concept, many African thinkers emptied their thought on the nature of the concept – ethnophilosophy. For Jude Onebunne (2020:9), ethnophilosophy is “philosophy that is based on the works of ethnographers, sociologists, and anthropologists, interpreting our African world view as well as our myths and folklores as constituting part of African philosophy.” For Onebunne therefore, ethnophilosophy if should be defined as it stands, means that ethnophilosophy is “a critical study against the age long bias that Africans lacked culture and history and are illiterates”(2020:9), which is what Hountondji argues against, in his critique of ethnophilosophy and even advocate for its destruction.

Moving further, *Online Dictionary of Philosophy* (web, 2021), holds that it is “the study of indigenous philosophical systems.” In his conception, Njoku (2022:11) defines ethnophilosophy as, “a tendency to treat cultural issues as philosophical issues.” More so, the idea of Hountondji cannot be left out here. For Hountondji (1983:34), ethnophilosophy is “to reconstruct a particular Weltanschauung, a specific world view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and moreover, philosophical through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs, and institutions in short, various data concerning the cultural life of African people.”

In a short exposition of the person of Paulin Hountondji, he is one of the leading philosophical pundits of Africa born in the year 1942 in Ivory Coast though of Benin Republic by origin. After his secondary education, he became a student of Althusser in the middle of 1960 during his Higher Education days in Paris. Hountondji became a Professor at the National University of Benin. He was majorly influenced by Jean Jacques Derrida and wrote extensively in French language. Most of his works covered some topics in African philosophical thoughts and its goals. He also studied the 18th century German – African philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo whom was African by origin. Finally, Hountondji succeeded in becoming a Professor of philosophy at the University of Cotonou.

HOUNTONDJI’S IDEA OF AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY/ETHNOPHILOSOPHY

In his quest for an independent African philosophy, Hountondji proposed that African philosophy must be philosophy in its real sense and African in its background. This does not mean singling out a particular concept or cultural heritage of an African people and generalize it as African philosophy. This he argued as a result of his rejection of *Bantu Philosophy* as being African philosophy. According to Aime Cesaire (2005), “by African philosophy I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.”

It follows that what Hountondji projects is the claim that African philosophy is an intellectual work that is independent of Western support that African philosophers owe allegiance to. This means that,

he noticed that what the predecessor African philosophers did was an articulation of wisdom that is rooted in the past events of the Africans against the explicit, argumentative, and pluralistic nature of philosophy in general. Noting this flaw, Hountondji(1983:32) opined that, “African philosophy arose historically, from the work of European missionaries and anthropologists, rather than from that of African philosophers.” With this view, the magnified works of Placid Tempels (*Bantu Philosophy*) and of Alexis Kagame (*Philosophy Rwanda*) were vehemently rejected by Hountondji.

More so, the rejection of these works made Hountondji to criticize them. Even though being the forerunner of an African philosophy, Tempels *Bantu Philosophy* could be seen as a mere ethnophilosophy in the eyes of Hountondji. In his words, ‘it is an ethnological work with philosophical pretensions, or more simply, if I may coin the word, a work of ethnophilosophy’ (1983:34). However, in order to relieve African philosophy the burden of this Hountondjian stigmatization as a mere ethnophilosophy, many African philosophers tend to reconstruct the Belgian idea of the *Bantu philosophy*. But as they try, they all face the same problem of arriving at singling out one thing or concept and philosophizing on it. This is because, since *Bantu Philosophy* has become a gateway for their point of departure in their enterprises, they will end up doing what Tempels did that is, abstracting a commonly attributed African world view and interpret it philosophically as a matter of concern with regards to the Africans in general.

To this end, Hountondji argues that, abstracting certain concepts and reasoning into it from a particular custom or tradition cannot give one an authentic philosophy and as such, this cannot be called African philosophy. This being that, the concept per say emanates from the customs and traditions of a particular people or tribe. It follows that the results from one’s oral experience, and ethnographical concepts such as folklores, proverbs, legends, parables and so on cannot be called philosophy but ethnophilosophy and if we should take that to be the bases of African philosophy, it means that Africans has no philosophy but ethnophilosophy.

By implication, what Hountondji could call an African philosophy must be texts put in writing. It must be written or authored by the people of Africa (African authors). In his words with regards to this, he averred that, “by African philosophy I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves”(1983:34). Therefore, the work of Tempels called *Bantu Philosophy* for Hountondji was only elevated to the level of an African philosophy. Likewise the works of other African philosophers who towed the way of Tempels as a leaning wall are all classified as same because, their work did not portray authenticity of a philosophical enterprise not minding that they were Africans. Be that as it may, Hountondji’s critique of ethnophilosophy is as a result of the points he noted to be the major or fundamental hindrance to the works of these philosophers from attaining the level of an African philosophy.

HOUNTONDJIS CRITIQUE OF ETHNOPHILOSOPHY

The fact remains that Hountndji could not stomach the early works that were presented as African philosophy but his discontent did not prevent African philosophers (especially the contemporary ones) from moving forward in the quest for an independent and authentic African philosophy. As it is, the various ways in which Hountoundji did attack the early texts of African philosophy as well as the succeeding ones that for him towed the way of the predecessors did not leave anything good about them. Also, him ascribing them all as ethnophiolosophy rather than African philosophy did raise thought provoking questions in the mind of many concerned Africa philosophers as to where lay African philosophy?

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To this effect, African philosophy in the light of Paulin Hountondji ought to be independent of traditional thoughts. It must be established on the pedestal of argumentative, pluralistic, and individualistic nature. The thought of the author must not be minced with abstract concepts that are generally viewed by a particular people. This means that the author must be authentic and free in expressing his thought so as to receive critics and counter critics. Thus, Udefi Amechi (2015:16), says Hountondji denies that “African traditional thought is true philosophy, classifying it as mere ethnophilosophy, since it deals with orality, and other ethnographical materials like proverbs, parables, folklores, fables, songs, etc.”

In his critique of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji (1983:52) argues that for some philosophers of Africa, “they see it as a matter of duty to reconstruct the thought of his forefathers, the collective Weltanschauung of his people.” In his words, he avers that ethnophilosophy is “to reconstruct a particular Weltanschauung, a specific world view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and moreover, philosophical through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs, and institutions in short, various data concerning the cultural life of African people”(Hountondji, 1983:34). Be that as it may, Hountondji did not stop with this exposition. He went further to identify series of criticisms on ethnophilosophy of which the five major critics are what we shall be concerned with in this work.

The first critique that Hountondji had against ethnophilosophy is the problem of methodology (**Method**). Here, he questions the methodology used by these ethnophilosophers. In his view, “one philosophizes with a method and prior knowledge. In that case, there is a terminology, a vocabulary, a conceptual apparatus bequeathed by philosophical tradition which we can never do without if we are to be authentic philosophers... the philosopher must adhere to the philosophical method”(1983:71-72). Therefore, for the fact that the ethnophilosophers did not adhere to the philosophical method, their works are not philosophical but anthropological. This being that, they identified with the anthropological method and as such, their works are of more descriptive inclined rather than being analytic in nature. It is also covered by the shade of a collective or general world view thereby disqualifying ethnophilosophy from the field of philosophy.

The second critique is on the level of ethnophilosophy not being African oriented (**Non-African Orientation**). For Hountondji, the whole enterprise of ethnophilosophy is Western oriented. It means that, the ethnophilosophers did not make out time to produce anything for the African consumption. Their works were not meant for the people of Africa but a masterminded enterprise backed up by the colonial giants. The hallmark of everything is that, the ethnophilosophic enterprise was a project in disguise and is geared towards the Western promotion of their social project. According to Hountondji (1983:63), “it is a self-deluding invention that hides behind its own project.” And by mere looking at the very last chapter of the *Bantu Philosophy*, one can vividly see what Hountondji is lamenting about. There is this mission to civilize which the Western man projects towards Africa. Hountondji avers that, “the black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under investigation, an object of possible discourse”(1983:34).

With this exposition from Hountondji, the picture becomes more clear why he argues that African philosophy must be literatures or texts put into writing and must be written by Africans and are addressed thus by their very authors. By implication of this assertion, it follows then that, since the *Bantu Philosophy* was written by a foreigner Placid Tempels, it must be rejected to be African

philosophy because, Tempels is not of African background. This was what Hountondji did. Not only that he rejected that of Tempels, but, also rejected out rightly all other texts of the African origin that followed the way of Tempels in their search to defend African philosophy. Therefore, since Tempels *Bantu Philosophy* was not of African background, it ceases to be African philosophy likewise the texts of those that copied him.

The third critique against ethnophilosophy is its inability to be in a written form (**Writing of Texts**). Hountondji argues that ethnophilosophy is not in a written form and for that, cannot be philosophical at all. He holds that(1983:33), “African philosophy is a set of text, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.” To this effect, since ethnophilosophy is not in this form, it cannot be philosophy. He believes that, “oral tradition favours the consolidation of knowledge into dogmatic intangible systems”(Hountondji, 1983:103), as against written ones and as such, oral tradition cannot provide material support to the reader and concerned as that written tradition does.

This tradition is also considered in the aspect of criticism. This being that, the thesis and antithesis or the criticism and counter criticism of oral tradition is rarely achievable due to the nature of the tradition being orally transmitted. But with respect to the written tradition, the criticism and counter criticism is ascertained in the sense that the work is open for everyone to access and are also available to the people concerned. Hountondji in this regards holds that, even though one can find philosophers in Africa, the problem then is on the areas of their works which are mostly directed or traced down to African sages. That is to say, their works are more of oral tradition rather than being written and as such, cannot be termed philosophy until the authenticity of them being in a written form is ascertained. It is only at this point that Africans can talk of an African philosophy.

Coming to the fourth critique, Hountondji criticized ethnophilosophy on the level of it being a collective world view (**Collective World view**). This critique is what Hountondji referred to as ‘Weltanschauung’ saying that ethnophilosophy is full of a collective world view. For him, philosophy should and cannot be brought as low as to the level of a collective world view. This simply means that philosophy deals on individual context against Weltanschauung. Hence, philosophy is associated with the individual who is free both in thought and discourse. In this sense, Hountondji discarded the work of Tempels and other enterprise that took after him like Kagame, Mbiti, *Igbo philosophy*, *Yoruba philosophy*, and so on and regarded them all as collective world view of the people and by that, cannot be philosophy talk of an African philosophy in the actual sense of what philosophy is. Therefore, ethnophilosophy as is being presented by the African ethnophilosophers cannot qualify to be called philosophy since what they stand to communicate are nothing rather than a collective world view (Weltanschauung) of the people of Africa.

Finally, the fifth and last critique we shall consider in this work is the one of ethnophilosophy being non scientific oriented (**Non- Scientific Orientation**). What Hountondji aims at in this context of non scientific orientation is the inability of ethnophilosophy to identify the scientific method of the African science. According to Hountondji, (106), “African philosophy is inseparable from African science.” By implication of this claim, it presupposes that all works of the African philosophers and ethnophilosophers that are struggling for recognition in the field of African philosophy must be scientifically oriented. It follows then that, anyone found wanting within the ambience of science (African) cannot stand to be regarded as philosophy (African). Therefore, since ethnophilosophy is found wanting in this context according to Hountondji, it cannot be an African philosophy.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The journey of our enterprise so far communicates Paulin Hountondji's vehement rejection of ethnophilosophy. Even though him being an African, he was so critical about the works of both his predecessors and contemporaries, that is, what they produce in the name of an African philosophy. Meanwhile, blames may not be so much extended to some of these African philosophers whose aims are to reconstruct and restructure that mindset that Africans have no philosophy. Their intent is to give Africa a face lift in the midst of other world intellectual summit that Africa has philosophy. To show that Africans are not primitive, they can reason abstract things and thus are not bereaved of rationality.

But in the quest to posit these African qualities, it follows that most of the philosophers were not well guided from their point of departure, hence, they were like running from pillar to post in their fight for rationality. To these kinds of people necessitates the philosophical light of Paulin Hountondji be casted on their publications. He stood to prove in a critique that these philosophers took after Placid Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* and missed the basic philosophical backup that could have made their works different. Because of this, they couldn't measure up and he regarded them as ethnophilosophy since the said works are the product of the collective world view (Weltanschauung) of the Africans.

Moreover, Hountondji posits that for Africans to arrive at an authentic African philosophy, it must be free of collective world view and be individually oriented amidst freedom of thought and expression (discourse). That is to say, such philosophy must be in a written form come from an African orientation or background (authored by an African). It must as well follow the due philosophical process or method of inquiry and must be scientific oriented especially in the pattern of an African science. It is only through this process that Africans can arrive at an authentic and independent philosophy that is African.

By these criteria then, it is obvious that the new approach to African philosophy for Hountondji is "the right to criticism and free expression which is seriously threatened by our regimes of terror and ideological confusion must be guaranteed" (Attamah, 2021). This means that African philosophy will grow by "individual African's criticism and counter criticism of the scientific literature written by Africans" (Attamah, 2021). Be that as it may, Hountondji did not outrightly reject the possibility of the emergence of an African philosophy, but, pointed towards the way for which his brothers Africans can on their own develop an authentic and independent philosophy that will be African oriented against the ethnophilosophic enterprise (collective world view) presented to them by a foreigner.

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