

Articles

LEGACIES OF A CRITIQUE OF ETHNOPHILOSOPHY

Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* revisited

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ABSTRACT. This essay revisits Hountondji's famous critique of ethnophilosophy by re-reading his landmark text, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* and the debates that attended its sometimes problematic reception by a number of African scholars. It also it provides a reading of Hountondji's most recent text, *The Struggle for Meaning* to demonstrate the multiple ways in which the latter text amplifies the arguments of the former and similarly, it evinces how the latter text reduces the philosophical exclusivity of the former as a strategy for popularizing his central theoretical concerns. Indeed Hountondji's central contribution to African philosophy, the critique of ethnophilosophy, is implicated in the problematic of origins, which can be construed as a quest for foundations. In pursuing this methodological trajectory, we would see how very little of Hountondji's thought has changed and also demonstrates how the latter text (*The Struggle for Meaning*) provides the contexts and conditions for a better appreciation of his structures of thought together with a number of other equally important African thinkers. In some ways, it can be argued that *The Struggle for Meaning* is not an advancement of Hountondji's thought, rather, it is a largely eloquent recapitulation of earlier theoretical positions that often employs para-philosophical modes of discourse to restate what is indeed philosophical in African thought and what continues to be the enduring problems and challenges that face the contemporary African philosopher in considerably harsher milieus and times. The essay concludes by claiming that Hountondji's revisitations of Husserlian epistemology and the critique of ethnophilosophy are two of his central contributions to the making of modern African thought.

KEY WORDS: ethnophilosophy, problematic of origins, Hountondji, meaning, para-philosophical modes of discourse, Husserl

Several African thinkers ascribe the emergence of modern African philosophy to a discourse known as ethnophilosophy which in a way is an out-growth of colonial anthropological interventions. Ethnophilosophy in recent times has become greatly undervalued because

- (a) it is conceived as a product of a vast imperial undertaking that has its beginnings in the legitimization of colonialism and
- (b) because of its relentless and systematic deagentialization of subject peoples and agents and then
- (c) even at its best, because it can be excessively patronizing in its claims to give voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless.

However, it can be argued that ethnophilosophy in the wave of decolonization might in some respects have aided nationalist agitations and postcolonial ideologies of liberation that gave rise to certain counter-discourses (to colonialism and the master-discourses that promoted it) through which modern African thought gained its various discursive orientations, momentum and stability. For an African philosopher like Paulin J. Hountondji, ethnophilosophy provided the fertile grounds on which to develop a powerful philosophical practice such that is unique within the canon of modern African thought.

This essay revisits Hountondji's famous critique of ethnophilosophy by

- re-reading his landmark text, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*
- revisiting the debates that attended its sometimes problematic reception by a number of African scholars; moreover,
- it provides a reading of Hountondji's most recent text, *The Struggle for Meaning* to demonstrate the multiple ways in which the latter text amplifies the arguments of the former;
- relatedly, it evinces how the latter text reduces the philosophical exclusivity of the former as a strategy for popularizing his central theoretical concerns. Indeed Hountondji's central contribution to African philosophy, the critique of ethnophilosophy, is implicated in the *problematic of origins*, which is also a quest for foundations.

In erecting this particular discursive frame we would see how very little of Hounodonji's thought has changed and also demonstrate how the latter text (*The Struggle for Meaning*) provides the contexts and conditions for a better appreciation of his structures of thought together with a number of other equally important African thinkers. In some ways, it can be argued that *The Struggle for Meaning* is not an advancement of Hountondji's thought, rather,

it is a largely eloquent recapitulation of earlier theoretical positions that often employs para-philosophical modes of discourse to restate what is indeed philosophical in African thought and what continue to be the enduring problems and challenges that face the contemporary African philosopher in considerably harsher milieus and times.

Anthony Appiah calls *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* perhaps

"the most influential work of African philosophy written in the French language."¹

In his preface to a new edition of the somewhat controversial text, Hountondji explains why he makes the critique of ethnophilosophy his theoretical point of departure in addition to restating the conditions of mental enslavement in Africa, the ever unfavourable relations in the international division of labor, the continuing peripheralization of so-called peripheral knowledges and the abiding interest in science and technology in the African postcolony. These various concerns are important for him because they have a profound impact not only on how Africa relates to itself but also to other parts of the globe. Abiola Irele echoing Hountondji, writes, "no cultural development of any importance will be possible in Africa until she had built up a material strength capable of guaranteeing her sovereignty and her power of decision not only in the political and economic but also in the cultural field."² Indeed, since the publication of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, the multiple problems of the African continent have worsened. Africans know what needs to be done to get out of the unending cycle of degradation, violence and general socio-political disequilibria, but the material power and conditions together with favourable international contexts are usually lacking.

Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary, initiated the ethnophilosophical tendency in philosophico-anthropological studies in Africa with the publication of his work, *La Philosophie bantoue / Bantoe-filosofie* in 1945. Hountondji argues that this pioneering text was written primarily for a European audience in which the Bantu subject features as a mere anthropological ob-

¹ K.Anthony Appiah, Forward, *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa*, Athens: Ohio University Center of International Studies, p. xii.

² Abiola Irele, Introduction, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 25.

ject, a passive presence awaiting the attentions and ministrations of the European adventurist in material, intellectual and psychic terms. In his words,

“it aims on the one hand at facilitating what it calls Europe’s ‘mission to civilize’ (by which we understand: practical mastery by the colonizer of the black man’s psychological wellsprings) and, on the other hand, at warning Europe itself against the abuses of its own technocratic and ultra-materialistic civilization, by offering her, at the cost of a few rash generalizations, an image of the fine spirituality of the primitive Bantu.”³

Thus, a crucial problematic is raised: the colonizer can ‘civilize’ the ‘native’ on the condition that she spiritually redeems herself.

Tempels’s corpus provoked a few intellectual reactions from a Rwandais priest, Alexis Kagame. Kagame attempts to construct a universal ontology drawing from an Aristotelian philosophy of consciousness. Similarly, in incorporating Greek syntactical structures in relation to his mother tongue, his entire theoretical project fails in Hountondji’s view:

“His critique, [...] is not a radical one. He should have renounced Tempel’s whole project instead of accepting its dogmatic naiveté and carrying it out slightly differently. Kagame should not have been content to refute Tempels, he should have asked himself what the reasons were for his error. Then he might have noticed that Tempels’ insistence on emphasizing the differences was part and parcel of the whole scheme, the reconstruction of the Bantu *Weltanschauung*, inasmuch as the scheme was not inscribed in the *Weltanschauung* itself but was external to it.”⁴

Hountondji grants that Kagame has a powerful theoretical temperament but concludes in the same vein that his

“work simply perpetuates an ideological myth which is itself of non-African origin.”⁵

Other prominent ethnophilosophers include⁶ Makarakiza, Lufuluabo, Mulgago, Bahoken, Fouda and in some respects, William Abraham.

³ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, p. 49.

⁴ Ibid. p. 51.

⁵ Ibid. p. 44.

⁶ Ibid.

In other words, African scholars who engage in ethnophilosophy are no better than their western counterparts in constructing doubtful mythological theories and depictions of Africa. In his view:

The African ethnosopher's discourse is not intended for Africans. It has not been produced for their benefit, and its authors understood that it would be challenged, if at all, not by Africans but by Europe alone. Unless, of course, the West expressed itself through Africans, as it knows so well how to do. In short, the African ethnosopher made himself the spokesman of All-Africa facing All-Europe at the imaginary rendezvous of give and take- from which we observe that 'Africanist' particularism goes hand in glove, *objectively*, with an abstract universalism, since the African intellectual who adopts it thereby expounds it, over the heads of his people, in a mythical dialogue with his European colleagues, for the constitution of a 'civilization of the universal'.⁷

Hountondji argues in several instances that the discourse of ethnophilosophy, rather than instituting a genuine philosophical practice in Africa has instead prevented its development. It is a waste of time as a scholarly endeavor and a misdirected kind of labor in which preconstituted structures of thought are mummified. In short, the preoccupation with ethnophilosophy discourages the confrontation with the problems and challenges of the present. By the practice of ethnophilosophy,

"we have unwittingly played Europe's game- the Europe against which we first claimed we were setting ourselves to defend. And what do we find at the end of road? The same subservience, the same display of wretchedness, the same tragic abandonment of thinking by ourselves and for ourselves: slavery."⁸

Within ethnophilosophical literature,⁹

"there is a myth at work, the myth of primitive unanimity, with its suggestion that in 'primitive societies- that is to say, non-Western societies- everybody always agrees with everyone else. It follows that in such societies there can never be individual beliefs or philosophies but only collective systems of belief."

⁷ Ibid. p. 45.

⁸ Ibid. p. 50.

⁹ Ibid. p. 60.

By the time Hountondji attained the height of his intellectual/ philosophic powers, ethnophilosophy had been deprived of its theoretical momentum;

“that discourse has lost its critical edge charge, its *truth*. Yesterday it was the language of the oppressed, today it is a discourse of power. Formerly a romantic protest against European pride, it is now an ideological placebo.”¹⁰

Perhaps one of the most damaging remarks Hountondji makes regarding the concept of ethnophilosophy is that it is

“a mystified discourse and a dreamlike description of a collective thought that exists only in the inventor’s head.”¹¹

Similarly, Hountondji has criticized the trend in Africa called philosophic sagacity or what he terms a *littérature de pensée*.¹²

It is interesting to note that the word ethnophilosophy was not coined by Hountondji or Marcien Towa as it is often assumed. Kwame Nkrumah had registered for a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania in 1943 and had proposed to work on what he termed ‘ethnophilosophy.’ In one of his numerous definitions of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji writes that it is

“the extension into the field of thought in general of the inventory of the corpus of so-called ‘primitive’ knowledges, [an inventory] that had been undertaken at that time for plants and animals by two pilot-disciplines: ethnobotany and ethnozoology.”¹³

Consequently, Hountondji together with Marcien Towa made their reputations as philosophers for their relentless critiques of ethnophilosophy.

Hountondji has made many metaphilosophical reflections, indulged in elaborate political philosophizing and written about the adverse conditions that prevail over the international division of intellectual labor. First, he is a committed intellectual in some of the most illustrious connotations of the term: for instance, he argues that

“the responsibility of African philosophers (and of all African scientists) extends far

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 171.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 173.

¹² Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, p. 81.

¹³ Paulin J. Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 208.

beyond the narrow limits of their discipline and that they cannot afford the luxury of self-satisfied apoliticism or the quiescent complacency about the established disorder unless they deny themselves as both philosophers and as people. In other words, the theoretical liberation of philosophical discourse presupposes political liberation.”¹⁴

One of the charges often made against Hountondji is that he is not sufficiently political for an African philosopher and that he is too theoretical to have any redeeming political value in the continent. But more on this claim later.

Ethnophilosophy, we are constantly reminded is an invention of the west; an invention defines what is ‘primitive’ and what is ‘civilized’, what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘unnatural’, what is ‘normal’ and what is ‘abnormal’ and so on. Hountondji points out that these classifications and various myths of unanimity only serve to

“feed the Western taste for spice, sensation and exoticism.”¹⁵

The native is violently otherized, violently abused and laid prostrate for western gaze, scrutiny, fetish and consumption. In this way,

“the essential fine responsibility of the primitive was preserved, along with his good-natured insouciance, his passivity, his impotence.”¹⁶

Indeed many of Hountondji’s conclusions are relevant for postcolonial theory and cultural studies. Unfortunately, his work is not always cited by theorists of the postcolonial and cultural studies. But perhaps this grave oversight is not as damaging as the charges made against him by his fellow African scholars.

Olabiyi Yai wrote a searing critique¹⁷ of *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* that provoked a multiplicity of reactions within and beyond the African continent. First of all, he accuses Hountondji of not giving an adequate

¹⁴ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 80.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Olabiyi Yai, “The Theory and Practice in African Philosophy: The Poverty of Speculative Philosophy,” *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. VI, No. 2, July 1977.

definition of African philosophy. Specifically, he writes,

“the flight from a debate on the content of African philosophy tells of the inadequacy of the political and philosophical discourse conducted by our abstract philosophers.”¹⁸

Yai charges Hountondji of “elitism, philosophism and scientism.”¹⁹ He strikes hard at Hountondji when he writes,

“the philosophical stake in Africa is not an interest that concerns only the “philistine” or “intellectual” strata of the petty bourgeoisie, for the masses too must have must make their voices heard. And here dialectical materialism becomes pertinent, with its irreplaceable role as philosophy of praxis and as philosophy of the oppressed.”²⁰

The point being made is that Hountondji’s thought has virtually no political relevance.

Oyekan Owomoyela also published a long critique of Hountondji’s work which is less strident than Yai’s. Owomoyela’s general contention about Hountondji’s philosophical project is that:

“Whereas the case against ethnophilosophy could be construed as being against the misguided concoctions of foreigners and their African cohorts, the philosophers’ pronouncements leave one with the certainty that the real object of their displeasure is African tradition and not what ethnophilosophers make of it.”²¹

He also states with a demonstrable modicum of hesitation:

“Hountondji’s suggestion that African Studies as a discipline is suspect because it was invented by Europeans and is, therefore, part of the European tradition, is strange.”²²

Finally, he makes the claim that

“Anglophone philosophers tend to be more receptive to the philosophical traditions of

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 16.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 18.

²¹ Oyekan Owomoyela, “Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration”, *African Studies Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1987, p. 80.

²² Ibid. p. 92.

African traditions than are their Francophone colleagues.”²³

Thus we have two popular arguments against Hountondji's corpus. First, there is the claim that he is not sufficiently political. There is also the charge that in his attempts to denigrate ethnophilosophy, he ignores the importance and possibilities inherent in indigenous African traditions. The point is how accurate are these assertions? Do these claims really do justice to Hountondji's landmark text, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*? And then how has his subsequent work tried to grapple with these two main charges? Indeed these two charges relate to two of the most powerful tendencies in modern African thought: Marxism and nativism which a formulation of poststructuralist thought in Africa has revealed to be fake philosophies (*philosophies du travestissement*).²⁴ The point is, are both Yai and Owomoyela fair in their assessments of Hountondji's work?

Hountondji had defined African philosophy to

“mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.”²⁵

This seems to be an agreeable starting-point. However, this not only the definition he gives. He also concerns himself with the various tasks that face the contemporary African philosopher.

In the case of Africa, philosophy as a meditation on the logic of sciences, on the conditions of their constitution and their development, on the theoretical and historical relationships that they have between them and, as the case may be, between them and their technical applications, on the forms and ways of their social insertion, the modes of social appropriation of their theoretical and practical results, briefly, philosophy as theory of science in the widest sense of the term, can play²⁶ a considerable role by illuminating

²³ Ibid. p. 96.

²⁴ See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 and his “Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2001.

²⁵ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy. Myth & Reality*, p. 32.

²⁶ Paulin Hountondji, “What Philosophy Can Do,” *QUEST: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.1, No. 2, 1987, p. 19.

with a new light the problem, henceforth classic, of the contribution of science and of technology to the development of our societies.

To identify and appreciate the value, richness and range of Hountondji's philosophical contributions in Africa we have to look beyond Marxian and nativist critiques, we have to refocus on the historical conjuncture in which his *oeuvre* took shape in terms of cultural, political and intellectual parameters and how they affected the production of philosophical thought, we also have to consider the contributions of his contemporaries in relation to his thought and how they have fared over time and space. If we employ this set of criteria, Hountondji remains vital to modern African thought. However, I think his importance lies beyond his critique of ethnophilosophy which oftentimes is over-drawn. It lies instead in his readings of African thinkers such as Anton-Wilhem Amo and Kwame Nkrumah and what their works and contributions accomplished in specific contexts. This is a point I will stress later on.

Apart from his extensive metaphysical preoccupations, Hountondji also employs empirical instruments to define the boundaries and possibilities of African philosophy. Part of his empirical strategy is bibliographical. For instance, he mentions authors and their works that have had an impact on modern African philosophy: The Rwandais abbot, Alexis Kagame, Mgr Makarazika of Burundi, Antione Mabona, a South African priest, Father A. Rahajarizafy of Malagasy, Francoise-Marie Lufuluabo of the former Belgian Congo, Vincent Mulago also of the former Belgian Congo, Jean-Calvin Bahoken, the former Protestant clergyman of Cameroon, the Kenyan pastor, John Mbiti, the Nigerians, Adesanya and J. O. Awolalu, Alassane N'Daw from Senegal, Prosper Laleye, from the Republic of Benin and so many others who contributed to the making of modern African philosophy.²⁷ Thus, Hountondji not only *identifies* what he understands to be African philosophy, but also identifies the pioneers of the field. In retrospect, most of Yai's charges seem insubstantial. Furthermore, there are quite sympathetic readings of his work:

"Hountondji outlines [...] criteria that if met, would give substance to African philosophy. The first criterion is a shift away from the metaphysical issues (*viz.*, "the

²⁷ See Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, pp. 58-59.

meaning of life”, “human dignity”, “the existence of God”, etc.) that have infused ethnophilosophy and stifled genuine philosophical activity.”²⁸

On the other hand, Owomoyela's misgivings about the general criticisms of ethnophilosophy go beyond his reading of Hountondji. He claims for instance that Anglophone philosophers tend to be more receptive to traditional African religions than their Anglophone counterparts.²⁹ This is a highly suspect claim. Both Hountondji and V. Y. Mudimbe in their works, demonstrate that Francophone Africa with its strong traditions of colonial Catholicism was at the forefront of philosophical deliberation on the continental level. Ethnophilosophy, as a discursive branch of African philosophy gained its initial indigenous impetus (and also counter-discourses) through the efforts of authors such as Kagame, Marcien Towa, Fabian Eboussi-Boulaga and of course Hountondji who are/ were from the French-speaking parts of Africa. Most of the central texts of African philosophy that Mudimbe names are Francophone or have French authors; P. Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue/Bantoe-filosofie* (1945), M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: Ententiens avec Ogotem-meli* (1948), A. Kagame, L.S. Senghor, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine* (1962), F. Eboussi-Boulaga, “Le Bantu Problematique” *Presence Africaine* (1968), F. Eboussi-Boulaga, *La Crise du Muntu* (1977), A.J. Smet, *Histoire de la philosophie africaine contemporaine* (1980).³⁰ Finally, Hountondji claims that “Kagame began the era of African philosophy *stricto sensu*, that is, of the acceptance of responsibility for philosophical discourse by the Africans themselves.”³¹

Consequently, both Yai and Owomoyela have very little of enduring value to say of Hountondji's work. This is not to say there are no shortcomings to be found. Indeed there are some. Hountondji's second major book on African philosophy, *The Struggle for Meaning*, rehearses most of the argu-

²⁸ See Cheedy Jaya's review of *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* in *African Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1999, p. 208.

²⁹ Oyekan Owomoyela, “Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1987, p. 96.

³⁰ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parable & Fables: Exegesis, Texuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 52-53.

³¹ Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, pp. 90-91.

ments in *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* in addition to providing the biographical, cultural, political and intellectual contexts that formed the background of the latter text. In terms of new major philosophical breakthroughs one finds very little to say about it. However, it is an important text since in many respects, it is consistent with his earlier book and since it has so much to say about the processes of intellectual conditioning that informed the work of one of the most influential and indeed most consistent philosophical minds of modern Africa.

Hountondji began by writing a Ph.D. dissertation on Husserl under the watchful eyes of Canguilhem, Ricoeur, Derrida and Althusser who were his teachers at Ecole Normale Supérieure. He was fascinated by

“Husserl’s effort to ‘purify the sign.’ First, he excluded from his concerns the indicative sign- a material and empirical sign that is neither discourse nor part of discourse- in order to concentrate solely on expression. Next, he excluded from discourse itself those body movements and various gestures that involuntarily accompany speech and still derive from empirical indication, in order to focus on expression proper- on the linguistic which alone is the true bearer of meaning. Finally, he amputated the communicative dimension from language in which expression functions simultaneously as indices, to concentrate solely on the expression in “solitary mental life.”³²

More than two decades after his Ph.D. examination, Hountondji returns to Husserl, this time (1995) for the highly prestigious degree of *doctorat d’Etat* at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal. What could have informed his return to Husserl after a lapse of about twenty-five years? Hountondji gives a few hints:

“any conclusion, provided at this precise stage of my thinking, would have seemed premature to me. I necessarily left the reader dissatisfied, and even I had a feeling that I had interrupted myself mid-way through a sentence...”³³

It is as if Hountondji had to return to complete an unfinished sentence in both a metaphoric and literal sense. But what does this consummation mean in a philosophical sense? It is difficult to tell given his earlier reservations about continuing his research on Husserl with the ultimate aim of publishing his findings.

³² Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 54.

³³ Ibid. p. 72.

After his Ph.D. defense in France, Houtondji decided not write for a foreign public or over the heads of his compatriots.³⁴ The fate of Anton-Wilhelm Amo, a philosopher from the former Gold Coast who lived and worked in eighteen century Germany had indicated to him that an epistemic break was required. On Amo, he says,

"I considered it a failure that the work of this *African* philosopher could only be part, from beginning to end, of a *non-African theoretical tradition*, that it exclusively belonged to the history of Western scholarship. I concluded on the urgent need to put an end to the extraverted nature of all European-language discourse."³⁵

So he concludes that

"to publish on Husserl was not the obvious thing for an African academic."³⁶

Yet, more than two decades later he returns to Husserl as if it were a project that he simply had to complete. It is not certain that he completes it. Instead he merely re-treads a well known path and this manoeuvre can be seen as a strategy to revalidate his major philosophical trajectories to date. Husserl clearly remains an abiding interest for him but this long standing preoccupation had to be matched and counteracted with the quest to create a non-western theoretical practice. In view of this, his fascination for Husserl had to be held in check:

"I therefore had to work on the margins and, rather than plunge head-first as a narrow specialist on an author or a current of thought, to clear the field patiently, establish the legitimacy and the outlines of an intellectual project that was at once authentically African and authentically philosophical."³⁷

Thus he moves from a preoccupation with Husserl to reading Tempels which entails the beginning of his critique of ethnophilosophy. He is still of the view that "the critique of ethnophilosophy is still largely a Western affair, because the ethnophilosophy that denounces it is itself an invention of

³⁴ Ibid. pp. 72-73.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 73.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 73.

the West.”³⁸ Henceforth, his project would be to show

“that ethnophilosophy had a more ancient history that was linked to the history of anthropology in general- that is, to the history of the Western gaze on so-called primitives societies.”³⁹

Olabiyi had argued in his famous article that speculative philosophers such as Hountondji ignored the issues of praxis in their theorizing. Hountondji on his part claims that theory had no usefulness for him unless it is linked to practice. In his words,

“theory has meaning only if it is organized and subordinated to practice, that it derives its legitimacy- insofar as it is itself a form of practice- from its foundational role in relation to other practices.”⁴⁰

In organizing his philosophical practice, he acknowledges his debts to Fanon for indicating the relations between the political, language and Cesaire who he calls the “unrivaled awakener of consciences.”⁴¹ However, there existed the problem of foundations. The inferiorization of the black race by the histories and experiences of slavery and various forms of colonization- political, economic and cultural- had the effect of *imageing* the African continent as a *tabula rasa*. Indeed

“the question of writing became unavoidable: to what extent could one conceive a history of African thought in the absence of a writing that would have enabled the different doctrines to situate themselves in relation to others.”⁴²

There was the urgent need to initiate, expand and sustain traditions of philosophical writing in Africa and Hountondji recounts his role in accomplishing this task through his participation in various initiatives that aimed to establish and consolidate where necessary, modern traditions of African philosophy.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 79.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 85.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 87.

⁴² Ibid. pp. 91-92.

The absence of theoretical traditions (before and after the dawn of political liberation) and universally recognizable philosophies of the self in Africa have been contentious issues of much theorizing. So the textual *tabula rasa* that Hountondji identifies as a crucial theoretical problem can in fact be tied to deeper sociopsychological concerns and patterns. The problem has its origins in the events of slavery, colonization and decolonization. Thus

“on the level of individual subjectivities, there is the idea that through the processes of slavery, colonization, and apartheid, the African self has become alienated from itself (*self-division*). This separation is supposed to result in a loss of familiarity with the self, to the point that the subject, having become estranged from him- or herself, has been relegated to a lifeless form of identity (*objecthood*). Not only is the self no longer recognized by the Other; the self no longer recognizes itself.”⁴³

The trauma of the event of colonization affected the collective African psyche directly and this is a point that Hountondji does not stress. Instead he concerns himself with the challenges of creating a philosophical tradition which is a preoccupation that has its own peculiar problems. The problem of creating an appropriate theoretical practice to deal the multiple disorienting effects of the colonial encounter has been framed thus:

“The effort to determine the conditions under which the African subject could attain full selfhood, become self-conscious, and be answerable to no one else soon encountered historicist thinking in two forms that led to a dead end. The first of these is what might be termed *Afro-radicalism*, with its baggage of instrumentalism and political opportunism. The second is the burden of metaphysics of difference.”⁴⁴

This reading of historicist thinking can be said to have acquired its first impulses and manifestations in African philosophical discourses in which discursive radicalism arose out of the various nationalist liberation struggles as exemplified by the works of Nkrumah, Nyerere and Cesaire (in which there is usually a re-appropriation and spectralization of Marxist and socialist ideologies) on the one hand, and the multiplicity of tendencies and discourses that have been generated by theoretical validations and counter-discourses of ethnophilosophy on the other. Thus the opposing divisions in

⁴³ Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 1 Winter, 2002, p. 241.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 240.

historicism thinking have deep philosophical implications and perhaps also philosophical origins. However, this largely convenient theoretical dualism is more complex in the case of ethnophilosophy and its critiques and its counter-discourses since it is problematic to typify ethnophilosophy as a form of nativism and nothing else. Hountondji has pointed out on several occasions that ethnophilosophy is an invention of the west but was later adopted by Africans for instrumental reasons. Indeed many strands and orientations characterize the problematic course of its gestation and development as a philosophical tendency; western/ African, Marxist/ non-Marxist, Eurocentric/ Afrocentric, Francophone/ Anglophone etc. Even Hontondji's project does not address these multiple tendencies and their concrete manifestations in their fullest possibilities.

In one of his numerous critiques of African forms of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji writes:

“The return to the real thus shatters into smithereens the founding myths of ethnophilosophy: the myth of primitive unanimity- the idea that in “primitive” societies, everyone is in agreement with everyone else- from which it is concluded that there could not possibly exist individual philosophies in such societies, but only belief-systems. In reality an unbiased reading of the existing intellectual production reveals something else. The African field is plural, like all fields, a virgin forest open to all possibilities, to all potentialities, a host to all contradictions and intellectual adventures like all other sites of scientific production.”⁴⁵

In this way, he differentiates between European and African forms of ethnophilosophy and suggests ways in which to move beyond the latter form. If the critique of ethnophilosophy is one of the most valuable and also one of the most consistent contributions of Hountondji to the development of modern African philosophy, then his preoccupation with the structures and institutions of knowledge production in Africa and also on the global level is equally worthy of attention. For instance, he has committed himself to critiquing a trend within ethnophilosophy so as to demonstrate

“how scientific exclusion connects to political exclusion and how, [...] the double problematic of Europe’s ‘civilizing mission,’ and inversely of the ‘heightening of the soul’ expected from Bantu cultures, is only meaningful as the “ideological problem-

⁴⁵ Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 107.

atic of triumphant imperialism.”⁴⁶

This scenario lies at the heart of the European projects of ethnophilosophy which as we ought to have noticed are somewhat different from African projects. Hountondji explains that

“the exclusion practiced by the European scholar becomes, when it is taken over by the African intellectual, extraversion.”⁴⁷

In order to overcome this pitfall, that is, the impasse of intellectual extraversion, there is the necessity to create

“an autonomous space for reflection and theoretical discussion that is indissolubly philosophical and scientific.”⁴⁸

Hountondji gives greater resonance to his analyses in pointing out that there is the need to de-ghettoize African modes of intellectual production: “thought must be brought out of its Africanist ghetto by acknowledging its right to be occasionally interested in something other than African – for instance in Plato, in Marx, in the theoretical heritage of Western civilization to assimilate and transcend it.”⁴⁹

The problem of intellectual extraversion is one that provokes a lot of useful insights from him. For instance, this is noticeable in his conceptualization of ‘distance’.⁵⁰ According to him,

“distance meant first of all geographical distance, the distance from which our scientific, economic, and political dependence is organized.”⁵¹

On the concrete academic level, ‘distance’ manifests in the following way:

“first and foremost, theory is elsewhere, in the sense of being physically distant. The best universities, the best equipped laboratories, the most authoritative scientific jour-

⁴⁶ Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 103.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See Paulin Hountondji, “Distances,” *Recherche, pedagogie et culture*, 1980.

⁵¹ Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 232.

nals, the greatest libraries, and the most credible publishing houses are located in the industrialized countries.”⁵²

In view of these kinds of conceptualization, Olabiyi Yai’s charge of excessive elitism on the part of Hountondji now appears unwarranted. In addition Hountondji either draws from or adds to postcolonial theory with regard to his stance on postcolonial conditions of knowledge production which condemns the cash strapped academic trapped in a postcolony⁵³ into

“accepting uncritically to play the role that the West had carved out for any Third World researcher: that of informant or, in the best, of scholarly informant.”

Hountondji’s disapproval of unanimism, one he shares with Anthony Appiah and V. Y. Mudimbe and which is embedded in his critique of African forms of ethnophilosophy is also one of his central themes. It is a stance that rejects the urge to subsume African beliefs, perceptions, modes of being and orders of production under *one* name. On the origins of the word, Hountondji writes,

“I borrowed the word “unanimism” from Jules Romains but used it in a different context to signify something different: to stigmatize both the illusion of unanimity in the reading of the intellectual history of a given culture, and the ideological exploitation of this illusion for the present and the future. The French writer had used the term, on the contrary, in a laudatory way.”⁵⁴

Hountondji seeks to explode all theoretical ghettos but sometimes, he seems to be deliberately creating problems himself. At one point, he states,

“African philosophy was first and foremost a European invention, the product of an intellectual history at the intersection of the most diverse disciplines, notably anthropology, the psychology of peoples, missiological theory, and a good many concerns.”⁵⁵

It is not enough to make this kind of assertion and leave it at that, this is evi-

⁵² Ibid. P. 233.

⁵³ Hountondji’s views here, echo those of Gayatri Spivak who had done a great deal of work in this area.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 132.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 124.

dently an issue that requires far more exploration and elaboration. He sets immense goals for himself;

"I sought to demarginalize Africa, and to place it firmly at the center of its own history in a world that is henceforth plural; a world whose unity cannot be the result of annexation, or some kind of hegemonic integration, but of periodic re-negotiation."⁵⁶

With equal lack of irony, it can be argued that the only kind of demarginalization that he has accomplished has to do with himself. Being a major African philosophical figure he is highly sought after within international circles but it is not certain how this unquestioned commodification affects institutional structures of knowledge production in Africa. In addition, strategies for demarginalization in postcolonial regions require a continuous foregrounding and rethinking of the colonial situation and the various categories and frames of perception to which it gives rise: colonizer/ colonized, premodern/ modern, private/ public, the existential and conceptual in-betweenesses, the categories of race, sex, class and gender and a host of other variables. These are crucial issues for any serious project of demarginalization.

He also replies to his numerous critics – Koffi Niamkey, Abdou Toure, Olabiyi Yai, Oyekan Owomoyela etc. – in often uncomplimentary ways. In one of such responses, he writes,

"one was clearly faced with a terrorist discourse, a discourse of intimidation whose aim was to frighten: a discourse that brandished the worst threats to achieve its end."⁵⁷

Olabiyi Yai, he calls "an irritated Africanist." Evidently his attitude towards his critics, who have contributed immensely to the dissemination of his thought, is somewhat contradictory given his views that the African intellectual had to demonstrate

"that no doctrine, no form of thought was forbidden to him, that at the conceptual level, the freedom of the individual could not, in Africa any more than elsewhere, be

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 141.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 168.

restricted in advance.”⁵⁸

He constantly declares the wish to see

“established in Africa an autonomous, theoretical debate, which would be the master of its problems and its themes rather than simply … being a distant appendage to Western theoretical debates.”⁵⁹

Again, the majority of his critics have by critiquing his work contributed to the broadening of the theoretical space he fought so much to get established.

Politics also form part of Hountondji’s concerns. Between 1991 and 1994, he held a ministerial position in the Republic of Benin which in some ways parallels Ernest Wamba dia Wamba’s move to join the military struggle of Congolese guerrilla fighters to remove Laurent Kabilia from power in 1998. Hountondji’s flirtations and involvement with politics are obviously less dangerous than Wamba’s but say a lot about the choices available to an intellectual in a postcolony and the existential peculiarities that result from the ceaseless conflict between the ‘private’ and ‘public’ domains in such a context. He makes a few remarks about the Republic of Congo which though important require greater elaboration:

“the “philosophy of authenticity,” “the state’s official doctrine, managed to reduce this identity to its most superficial and abjectively folkloristic level.”⁶⁰

These state-imposed attempts at identitity construction, at regulating the infrastructure of consciousness were in fact a ploy by Mobutism to consolidate its own myths of power and invincibility which had far more dramatic manifestations and consequences in everyday life. The torture, rape, pillage and massacres that were commonplace under Mobutism and post-Mobutist forms of political contestation are issues Hountondji does not conceptualize even as politics in most parts of Africa is being transformed to the “work of death.”⁶¹ The new forms of political contestation and the emergent technologies of domination in Africa obviously require a new vocabulary and new

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 125.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 96.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 112.

⁶¹ See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture*, Vol.15, No. 1, 2003.

modes of theorization as states are enfeebled or collapse under a multiplicity of pressures ranging the usual local struggles for political power to adverse conditions brought about neoliberal economic globalization. For instance, space, in its use and misuse, has given rise a new awareness about new forms of both statist and non-statist domination and aggression. Indeed in the so-called peripheries,

“the domestication of world time [...] takes place by domesticating space and putting it to different uses. When resources are put into circulation, the consequence is a disconnection between people and things that is more marked than it was in the past, the value of things generally surpassing that of people. That is one of the reasons why the resulting forms of violence have as their chief goal the physical destruction of people (massacres of civilians, genocides, various kinds of killing) and the primary exploitation of things. These forms of violence (of which war is only one aspect) contribute to the establishment of sovereignty outside, are based on a confusion between power and fact, between public affairs and private government.”⁶²

Hountondji's remarks on politics in Africa (in *The Struggle for Meaning*) have not advanced beyond how he conceptualizes it in his first book. So how productive has been his critique of ethnophilosophy? His critique has been important in setting a new set of problematics for African philosophers who wish to move beyond the founding problematic of African philosophy which is, “does it exist?” Ironically, a large part of his thought might have been impossible to accomplish without the existence of ethnophilosophy in both its Eurocentric and indigenous forms. Also, the critique of ethnophilosophy, which is largely a metaphysical undertaking is caught up in the founding problematic of African philosophy and its concomitant dead end. Thus it is caught up in the same problematic of origins. This problematic is projected by the attempts to formulate definitional and taxonomic grids for African philosophy – ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy and professional philosophy⁶³ – and in related forms of African intellectual production such as the discourses of nativism, developmentalism and Marxism which have been criticized as been largely coun-

⁶² Achille Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa,” *Public Culture*, 2000, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 260.

⁶³ P. O. Bodunrin, “The Question of African Philosophy,” *Philosophy*, 65, 1981.

terproductive.⁶⁴ Hountondji makes useful discoveries in evaluations of Amo and Nkrumah. For instance, his assessment of Nkrumah bears quite enduring insights:

“the critical reading of Nkrumah’s development and of the social and political struggles in Ghana of the period did not aim solely at shedding light on the intricacies of the book. It proposed a method that is applicable, should need be, to other texts. The reinsertion of thought in the real movement of history should enhance both a recognition of the specificity of works of speculative thought, and their relationship to the social, economic, and political context of different periods. It should finally found a pluralist vision of philosophy and African culture by sweeping away, once and for all, the unanimist prejudice and the myth of a society without history.”⁶⁵

Those earlier critiques of these two African philosophical figures actually bypass the dead ends of the critique of ethnophilosophy and the founding problematic of African philosophy. But we need more of them to expand the theoretical space of African philosophy. The metaphilosophical debates on ethnophilosophy dragged on for too long. Anthony Appiah discovered a worthwhile path and so did V.Y. Mudimbe in their separate and distinctive ways. Even Hountondji acknowledges this at several instances.⁶⁶ In the mature years (and perhaps also declining days) of his career, Hountondji returns to his old philosophical concerns: the [re]discovery of Husserl with its largely Eurocentric situationality, and the now familiar critique of ethnophilosophy and its inevitable problematic of origins, leaving very little in between except a narrative of a fortunate and eventful intellectual itinerary.

⁶⁴ See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 and also “Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2.

⁶⁵ Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 142.

⁶⁶ See for instance, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 127.