

**BOOK REVIEW****A REVIEW OF 'AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: MYTH AND REALITY' BY  
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Philosophical reflections in Africa today bear direct relation to issues of culture and history, a background provided by the colonial experience and formed by the mind of the westernized African elite. They believed that Africa is a continent that has contributed nothing to human ideas and civilization. Hegel and Levy-Bruhl promoted this idea that left Africa at the feet of western civilization. The philosophical piece that emerged at this time in confrontation of the colonial ideology is the work of Placid Tempels. His insistence on the need to recognize the rationality of the so-called primitive people carried a pointed refutation of the theories of Hegel and Levy-Bruhl. Following Tempels is Senghor's Negritude and Alexis Kagame's Bantou philosophy, which demonstrated a distinctive African spirituality and worldview. It is against this trend of philosophical activity, named ethno-philosophy that a reaction set in from the younger generation of African philosophers; a reaction against cultural nationalism and an affirmation of the independent and scientific character of African philosophy. It is to this school of young generation of African philosophers that Paulin Hountondji belongs.

In his work *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Hountondji defined African philosophy as, "...a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves" (p. 33). The Idea of African philosophy as philosophical works written by Africans already throws Tempels off the list of African philosophers. He shifts the focus of African philosophy from the analysis of African worldviews to the process and pattern of analysis itself. He wrote:

... African philosophy does not lie where we have long been looking for it, in some mysterious corner of some supposedly immutable soul, a collective and unconscious world-view which it is incumbent on us to study and revive, but that our philosophy consists essentially in the process of analysis itself (p. 33).

Hountondji criticized Tempels' Bantu Philosophy as being distinct from philosophy and of excluding the African from the stage of Africa's discourse with Europe. Hountondji sees Tempels' African philosophy as a myth, as non-existent, since that was an imaginary or mythical dialogue or discourse between him as

representing Africans and Europe. He further criticized Kagame, who continued on the footsteps of Tempels, for perpetuating an ideological myth which itself is of non-African origin. He observes the divergences between Tempels and Kagame, not as a discursive development, but as contradictions typical of ethno-philosophy. He accuses Kagame of being the prisoner of an ideological myth, which is a new version of Levy-Bruhl's 'primitive mentality'. Hountondji believes that the myth of Bantu philosophy needs to be destroyed so as to clear the ground for a genuine theoretical discourse.

Hountondji believes that African philosophy rests upon a confusion. A confusion between the popular or ideological use of the term which sees philosophy as wisdom, individual or collective, thus viewing everyone and people as philosophers, and the theoretical or strict use of the term, which sees philosophy as "a specific theoretical discipline with its own exigencies and methodological rule" (p. 47). Reacting against the ideological pattern of philosophy, he writes that:

... if we believe that it is of the essence of any science to be constituted by free discussion, by the confrontation of hypothesis and theories created by the thought of individuals (or at least assumed by them) and reaching total convergence through reciprocal amendment, then we must also find absurd the idea of collective, immutable and definitive philosophy, abstracted from history and progress (p. 47).

Ethno-philosophy, spearheaded by Tempels, for Hountondji, was only an attempt by the black to rehabilitate themselves in their eyes and those of Europeans. He distinguishes between ethnographic discourse and philosophical discourse, while ethno-philosophy deals with customs and worldviews, basically passive, about the past and grounded on the myth of unanimity, philosophical discourse is constituted by free discourse, hypothesis and theories created by individuals and active. The main line of the discourse of Hountondji is not that African philosophy does not exist, but that it is not what it is believed to be. It does not reside in worldviews and in the authority of tradition but must have a scientific and rational justification. It involves literatures produced by Africans, but dealing with philosophical problems that could be African or otherwise.

In Hountondji's bid to reconstruct the foundation of African philosophy, he emphasized that African philosophy, contrary to the impression obtainable in the writings of Tempels and Kagame, is a history, a process and a restless unfinished quest for truth that threads the path of the dialectical. This must involve a special method of inquiry. He argues further that philosophy:

... is not a closed system but a history, a debate that goes on from generation to generation, in which every thinker, every author, engages in total responsibility: I know that I am responsible for what I say, for the theories I put forward. I am responsible for them in the literal sense of the word, because I must always be prepared to answer

for them; I must be ready to justify them, to attest to their validity. It is as an individual that I take part in this debate, and in doing so I take part in the gradual unveiling of a truth that is not mine but everyone's, the outcome of all confrontation of individual thoughts which constitutes unending collective search (p. 72).

This perspective implies that philosophy is an open-ended search or story, and to attempt to put an end to it, is a delusion which he observes in Tempels. Philosophy cannot be reduced to a dumb acceptance or catechistic repetition of dogmas. He called for the kind of revolution effected by Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason and in Marx's revolution towards the economic history of production, so that the African may be freed from his self-incurred tutelage.

In Part two, to buttress his point, Hountondji made reference to Anton Wilhelm Amo from Axim, an old African town situated in the present-day Ghana, formerly the Gulf of Guinea, who undertook his philosophical career principally in Germany and taught as a teacher at the Universities of Halle, Wittenberg and Jena. He argued that the disappointment of many Africans is the inability to detect in the work of Amo that which is of African origin in terms of concepts and themes relating to African metaphysics or negritude. He writes that "To require thinkers to be content with reaffirming the beliefs of their people or social group is exactly the same as prohibiting them from thinking freely and condemning them in the long term to intellectual asphyxia" (p. 129). He cites him as an example for all African philosophers, "Africans should be capable of doing the same, of freely seizing the whole existing philosophical and scientific heritage, assimilating and mastering it in order to be able to transcend it" (p. 129). He thus calls for the Universalist approach of Amo rather than the Particularist approaches imbibed by many African ethno-philosophers.

Nkrumah (1964) had argued that to undertake fully the venture of the unification and liberation of Africa, a reforming, revolutionizing and inspiring philosophical system is indispensable. He calls this system Philosophical Consciencism. It would serve as a "body of connected thought which will determine the general nature of our action in unifying the society which we have inherited, this unification to take account, at all times, of the elevated ideals underlying the traditional African society" (p. 78). This would further equip the African to sift and blend appropriate values for the major elements of African history to form or fit the African personality. He further writes that:

Our philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of the African people. It is from those conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created. The emancipation of the African continent is the emancipation of man. This requires two aims: first, the restitution of the egalitarianism of the human society, and, second, the logistic mobilization of all our resources towards the attainment of that restitution. (p. 78).

Hountonji argues that Nkrumah's consciencism is founded on a unanimist illusion. He rehabilitated ethnographic notion of collective philosophy at a different level by stressing a traditional foundation for African thought.

### **Evaluation**

Hountondji's ideas have been criticized in various parts of this work; however, I will still make an effort to bring them together in this section. The criticisms to be presented here will be based on his main ideas. Hountondji had argued that ethno-philosophy is no philosophy on the grounds of orature. He referred to it as a pre-text, because it predates the emergence of a textual and discursive tradition, which they believe is significant to the formulation of the history of any philosophy. Oguejiofor (2002), while responding to Wiredu, had criticized this perspective as emerging from a western tradition. He wrote "...he is arguing from the background of other regions or cultures of the world, and taking such standpoint as standard" (p. 118). Moreover, philosophy does not become one because of writing. Writing is only a means of communication. This explains why, even though the works of Socrates were not written down by him, they were still referred to as philosophy.

Hountondji further categorized African thought as a collective thought and as such cannot be referred to as philosophy. He believes that philosophy should be dialectical and as such composed by individual thinkers. In responding to him, Gyekye (1987) argued:

But surely, it was individual wise men who created African 'collective' philosophy. A particular thought or idea is, as regards its genesis, the product of an individual mind. And although it is logically possible for two or more individuals to think the same thought or to have the same idea at the same time, nevertheless, the production of the thought as such is the work of the mind of each of the individuals concerned. It is always an individual's idea or thought or proposition that is accepted and gains currency among other people; at this stage, however, it is erroneously assumed to be the collective thought of the people. (p. 24).

This is evident in the Sage Philosophy of Oruka (1991), who sometimes sat together and at other times as individuals through argumentation arrived at that which is collectively accepted. Reacting to Hountondji's perspective, Gyekye (1987) further accuses him of denigrating, if not ignoring:

...the relevance and impact of the culture on the reflections of the individual thinker. Believing, as they do, that philosophizing is a wholly individualistic affair, they fail to recognize that the thinker perforce operates on the diffuse and inchoate ideas of the cultural milieu. We obviously cannot divorce the philosophy of an individual thinker from the ideas current among the people, for the philosophy of the individual thinker is rooted in the beliefs and assumptions of the culture. (p. 25).

Gyekye (1987), thus, understands the idea of collective thought as employed by Hountondji as a misnomer. He writes further:

There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as collective thought, if this means that ideas result from the intellectual production of a whole collectivity. What has come to be described a collective thought is nothing but the ideas of individual wise people; individual ideas that, due to lack of doxographic tradition in Africa, became part of the pool of communal thought, resulting in the obliteration of differences among these ideas, and in the impression that traditional thought was a monolithic system that does not allow for divergent ideas. (p. 24).

Gyekye maintains that there is a strong link between philosophy and culture. Although African philosophy is regarded as a collective philosophy, borne from individual minds, and although we regard the philosophy of the West as composed of individual thinkers, they were furnished with the ideas, beliefs and thoughts of their society, explaining why they are referred to as Oriental philosophy, speaking of the Oriental mind; British philosophy, speaking of the British Mind; European philosophy, speaking of the European mind; German philosophy, speaking of the German mind, etc.

These notwithstanding, we find in Hountondji a philosopher who raised fundamental questions as regards the history and nature of African philosophy. He dragged African philosophy and philosophers from their comfort zones to face the challenges of international criteria. With him emerged a reconstruction that spelt a new age for African philosophy.

**References**

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