

Critique of Ethnophilosophy, the Debate with Contemporaries and Hountondji's Turn to Endogenous Knowledges

In the wake of the debate during the early era of liberated nations in Africa on the question of a decolonization of academia, Paulin Hountondji intervenes in the question of what philosophy should look like in Africa and what it should aim for. He coins the term “ethnophilosophy”¹ (AP, p. 34), a pejorative notion, meant to describe ethnographic descriptions of African systems of thought designated as “African philosophy” or “Bantu philosophy.” By doing so, Hountondji seeks to demonstrate the lines of continuity between colonial anthropological research on non-Western contexts, with their racist underpinnings, and the ethnophilosophical research of his contemporaries. In opposition to the emerging field of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji argues for a rigid, scientific approach to philosophy, and was one of the founders—amongst colleagues such as Kwasi Wiredu or Henry Odera Oruka—of the so-called “professional school” in philosophy on the African continent. Professional philosophy aims at establishing a free, critical and emancipatory philosophical discourse in Africa that challenges conventional knowledge and practice (Oruka 1981).

¹The term was first used by Kwame Nkrumah, when he registered for a doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania in 1943 (Osha 2011, p. 44). However, it is not clear whether Nkrumah intended to use it in the same way as Hountondji did (Gyekye 1987, p. xvi). Other important critics of ethnophilosophy in the 1960s and 1970s were Franz Crahay, Marcien Towa, and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga.

This chapter will first outline Hountondji's main points of criticism against ethnophilosophy and his underlying notion of what African philosophy should look like. In Chapter 3, we will reconstruct debates that took place among philosophers in Africa at that period, and continue up until today, around Hountondji's arguments. Chapter 4 turns to Hountondji's critique of structures of neo-colonial dependence in academic knowledge production and his call for a turn to endogenous knowledge, as a source for the positive transformation of the continent, in order to tackle its current problems.

REFERENCES

- Gyekye, K. (1987). *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Oruka, H. O. (1981). Four Trends in Current African Philosophy. In A. Diemer (Ed.), *Symposium on Philosophy and the Present Situation of Africa* (pp. 1–7). Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Osha, S. (2011). *Postethnophilosophy*. New York and Amsterdam: Rudopi.