



INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF  
PAULIN HOUNTONDJI

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Nzimande.

Paulin Hountondji's work is on the one hand quite a specific intervention in philosophy in Africa, and a critique of 'African philosophy' or what he refers to as ethnophilosophy, and on the other hand offers a wide range of political and theoretical insights for social science students in general, and psychology in particular. His work, from which we have taken the article reprinted here - **African philosophy, myth and reality** (1974) - which is also the title of his book is an in-depth discussion of the theoretical, ideological and political presuppositions behind the idea of a specific 'African philosophy'. It is the notion of an underlying unanimist, collective African world view which ultimately is the 'key' to understanding African systems and thought, which Hountondji criticises in this penetrating work. He also shows how these ideological notions of ethnophilosophy are linked to the notions of 'the civilised' and 'primitive' under colonial relations of domination and exploitation.

The eight articles which make up the book were written between 1969 and 1974, with the exception of the Postscript (1976) which is a response and answer to some of his critics, and also a much more explicit commitment of philosophy in Africa to the politics of liberation. The first four articles (which make up Part One of his book) deal systematically with the problems of European

writings on 'African philosophy'. He reminds us that these writings, and especially the influential book by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels, **Bantu Philosophy**, written in 1945, were aimed mostly at an European audience. This European audience included the colonial authorities and scholars in disciplines like ethnology, anthropology, philosophy, and the study of African and 'primitive' religions. It is the persistence of this 'colonial attitude' in contemporary studies in and on African philosophy which Hountondji challenges.

It is this critique of the complex and subtle ideological penetrations in the form of various ethnophilosophies which should be of particular interest to psychology students as they too should critically assess the history of psychology in South Africa as in large part an 'ethnopsychology' (of Blacks). It is at this hidden level of theory that an ethnopsychology must be challenged, and not only in the superficial anti-racism of a liberal and reformist psychology. By simply saying, as social scientists, that we are anti-racist (in political life), does not necessarily and logically entail the absence of an ethnopsychology in our theoretical and empirical work (cf Nzimande's article in this issue). It is in the interests of scientific rigour in our psychological practices that we should engage with the arguments and analyses of Paulin Hountondji.

It is in the first four articles that Hountondji criticises the notion of an African philosophy, akin to some unamimist and collective world view. He rightly objects to different African peoples' world views being referred to as 'philosophy' in the sense

of a common universalist 'African philosophy'. He associates this ideological effect of an ethnophilosophy as integral to the reproduction of colonial relations of production and domination.

In the second part of his book, containing one article of Anton-Wilhelm Amo, an African philosopher in Germany in the 18th century, two articles on Kwame Nkrumah - 'the African Leninist', and a final one entitled 'True and false pluralism', Hountondji details what he considers to be the only valid use of the epithet 'African' in relation to philosophy, and that as a geographical location. Philosophy in Africa. He shows the diversity of philosophy in Africa, or by Africans in his analysis of the work of Anton-Wilhelm Amo whose writings were in the non-African theoretical tradition of classical philosophy, and Nkrumah, a political philosopher (Lenin) and leader in revolutionary struggles in Africa. It is this more historical and materialist analysis of African philosophy, the reality, as opposed to the myths created concerning the transhistorical unanimist view of the African 'primitive mind', which Hountondji promotes as philosophy in Africa, and gives particular political expression to in the final article of Part Two, and the Postscript of 1976.

He argues for a cultural pluralism, given the reality of colonial penetration in Africa, for example,

African culture must return to itself, to its internal pluralism, and to its essential openness. We must therefore, as individuals, liberate ourselves psychologically and develop a free relationship both with African cultural tradition and with the cultural traditions of other continents. This will not be a process either of Westernization or of acculturation : it will simply be creative freedom,

enriching the African tradition itself as an open system of options. (p.166)

For philosophy in Africa he argues for a twofold intervention : one in relation to scientific practice, and the other in relation to politics and marxism. Both, however with the practical intent of improving the conditions of life of the majority of people in different African countries. He says,

The prime problem of philosophy in present-day Africa is therefore how far it can contribute to the development of science. (p.175).

For marxism and philosophy the problem is more difficult because a number of regimes in Africa say they are 'governed' by marxist principles, however Hountondji feels,

It is not language but practice that determines whether a person or a regime is objectively on the right on the left. (p.181)

furthermore,

There is a danger that the time may soon come when, in the name of Marxism, we will be forbidden to read Marx. (p.183).

So in answering some of his critics that he had previously put philosophy 'above' political reality in some elitist theoreticist conception, although he still sees philosophy as a **relatively autonomous domain**, he now argues for a commitment of philosophy to the political realities of Africa, :

We must promote positively a **Marxist theoretical tradition** in our countries - a contradictory scientific debate around the work of Marx and his followers. For let us not forget this: Marxism itself is a **tradition**, a plural debate based on the theoretical foundations laid by Marx. (p.183).

It is in these two final articles that Hountondji's ideas concerning a progressive pluralism in relation to African traditions and cultures, and philosophy in Africa are most challengingly and cogently put forward. These ideas should have particular interest and relevance for social scientists in South Africa who are genuinely concerned about transforming social scientific practice in the struggle for a non-racial, democratic and egalitarian social order.

Some specific comments on the article **African philosophy, myth and reality** :

In this article Hountondji sets out to do two things : one is to criticise the vast literature of 'African philosophy' in so far as this literature has reproduced the ideological notion of an unanimist, collective African world view to which all Africans subscribe (transhistorically) whether they know it or not; and the second is to try to address this literature as a set of philosophical discourses and texts to the plurality of philosophy in Africa and to relate this to the political, economic and social struggles of the mass of African people. It is with this second positive critique and analysis of African philosophy that we have suggested that psychologists and other social scientists might constructively engage.

To comment then briefly on Hountondji's first negative criticism of 'African philosophy' in his article as being a 'fiction of a collective system of thought', 'the subject only of mythological

exploitiation', and a 'purely imaginary dialogue'. He is correct to dismiss this 'African philosophy' as ethnophilosophy, pre-philosophy, but he does this too quickly. For example he says,

it is a smokescreen behind which each author is able to manipulate his own philosophical views. It has nothing beyond this ideological function : it is an indeterminate discourse with no object. (emphasis added)

and again

This seemingly universal dialogue simply encourages the worst kind of cultural particularism... because its supposed peculiarities are in the main **purely imaginary** (emphasis added)

What we mean by suggesting that Hountondji dismisses ethnophilosophy too quickly is that in seeing ethnophilosophy as ideological in the way that he does above - an imaginary effect - it could encourage identifying certain discourses and texts as ideological and hence rejecting them summarily, without subjecting them to a necessary and detailed political, historical and theoretical analysis. It is argued that his notion of ideology, which seems influenced by an Althusserian\* conception, does not easily allow for a more concrete historical and scientific analysis of the social and theoretical practices of ethnophilosophy. It is important that we detail **how** and **why** the 'imaginary effects' of the ideological discourses of 'African philosophy' conceal, obscure, lie about, avoid, romanticise the harsh political, economic and social realities of present-day struggles in Africa. This is in fact the urgent theoretical and political task facing social

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\* He was a student in Paris in the sixties at the time of Althusser's ascendancy in marxist philosophy.

scientists, or in Hountondji's case - philosophers, in (South) Africa at the moment. It is the difficult reality of the unreality promoted by ethnophilosophers that we must analyse and expose, and not only identify as ideological, which it of course is.

In conclusion Hountondji's work can be recommended as a rigorous and committed scholarship that engages with the problems of his region, West Africa and particularly Benin, in relation to the practice of philosophy. In this brief introduction we have tried to show how this work can meaningfully contribute to a materialist social science in South Africa.

Finally Hountondji's book is introduced with an excellent critical history of (West) African scholarship - mostly social science scholarship - from the early part of this century up until and including Hountondji's work itself, by Abiola Irele, Professor of French Literature at the University of Ibadon. It critically assesses the work of African scholars in their attempts to struggle against the domination of their cultures and societies by colonialism and capitalism, from Senghorian negritude and its critiques to the 'new' philosophy of Marcien Towa and Hountondji in post-colonial Africa. A comprehensive and critical history of social science in South Africa would certainly help us in trying to develop a democratic social scientific practice in a politically transformed and free South Africa.