

# Reply to Hountondji

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Hountondji's chapter African Philosophy, Myth and Reality, published in Psychology in Society (no 2, January 1985), raises issues of major importance to any scholar concerned with the development of philosophical thought in the contemporary Africa. The chapter is an attempt to show that the prevailing idea of 'African philosophy', in the literature devoted to the problem, "has so far been the subject of only mythological exploitation". 'African philosophy' has been erroneously identified with an allegedly existing African world-view. Rather, African philosophy exists not as "the fiction of a collective system of thought", but "as a set of philosophical discourses and texts".(p.13)

Two main types of literature articulating a popular concept of African philosophy are distinguished in the African philosophical tradition: i) that articulating the church's views, ii) and that expressing the general ethno-philosophical conceptions. The former, according to Hountondji, are preoccupied in finding a "psychological and cultural basis for rooting a Christian message in the African's mind". It conceives of philosophy "on the model of religion, as a permanent, stable system of beliefs, unaffected by evolution, impervious to time and history, ever identical to itself".(p.17) The latter, broader in scope, seeks, in the various manifestations of African civilization and history, a "solid bedrock which might provide a foundation of certitudes, i.e. a system of beliefs". (p.18) Its main task is a "passionate search for the identity that was denied by the colonizer". This, in Hountondji's explanation, is connected to the fact that the word philosophy itself is applied to African with different meaning, "to designate no longer the specific discipline it evokes in its Western context but merely a collective world-view, an implicit, spontaneous,

perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere".(p.19) Behind this use, he proceeds, "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 everybody else".(p.19) The result is that "there can be no individual beliefs or philosophies but only collective systems of belief".(p.19) Thus, an African philosophy, in this sense, "has to account for an imaginary unanimity, to interpret a text which nowhere exists and has to be constantly reinvented, it is a science without an object, a 'crazed language' accountable to nothing, a discourse that has no referent, so that its falsity can never be demonstrated".(p.22)

What would be an alternative concept of African philosophy for Hountondji? Firstly, he reminds us that we cannot apply the same term to two different things: the collective world-view on the one hand and, on the other, the individual analytic activity which takes that world-view as its object. If one of these things has to be called philosophy, it would be the individual analytic activity. Thus, what in fact constitutes African philosophy is the body of philosophical literature written by African thinkers, dealing either with African issues or non-African issues.(p.24) He stresses that "what we are acknowledging is what it is, not what it says".(p.24) The criterion for this new definition is the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content. The effect would be to treat African philosophy "as a methodical inquiry with the same universal aims as those of any other philosophy in the world", destroying the dominant "mythological conception of Africanness" and restoring the truth that "Africa is above all a continent and the concept of African empirical, geographical concept and not a metaphysical one".(p.28) He warns, however, that "it is not enough to recognize the existence of an African philosophical literature".(p.34) This should be transformed, from "the simple collection of writings aimed at non-African readers and consequently upholding the peculiarities of a so-called African 'world-view' that it is today, into the vehicle of a free and rigorous discussion among African philosophers themselves".(p.34)

This paper is a preliminary attempt to discuss ethno-philosophical thinking in South Africa in the light of Hountondji's re-assessment of African philosophy. It is assumed that the criticisms he made in the African



Philosophy, Myth and Reality do not apply exclusively to his own region (West Africa), but that they constitute a meaningful contribution for an understanding of the South African experience in so far as philosophical thought is concerned. The influence of ethnophilosophy has been quite strong in South Africa. It will be demonstrated through some examples how some of the myths challenged by Hountondji have been reproduced and developed by some South African philosophers, who, as many others, never 'questioned the nature and theoretical status of their own analyses'. As the paper in Psychology in Society 2 is preceded by an introduction written by Hayes and Nzimande, where some criticisms are advanced on Hountondji's thesis, this paper will start with a brief assessment of those criticisms.

#### Hayes' and Nzimande's criticisms

Hountondji is accused of dismissing the popular idea of African philosophy as ethnophilosophy too quickly. This is related to his unfortunate statements that "it has nothing beyond this ideological function: it is an indeterminate discourse with no object" and this "seemingly universal dialogue simply encourages the worst kind of cultural particularism ... because its supposed peculiarities are in the main purely imaginary". The critics think that Hountondji's '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". (Hayes and Nzimande, p.9) To support this, they mention the fact that Hountondji was a student in Paris in the sixties at the time of Althusser's ascendancy in Marxist philosophy. They believe that the notion of ideology evoked here has a theoretical or practical implication. 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". (p.9)

I shall argue that these criticisms do not do justice to Hountondji's thesis. Firstly, they do not recognize the method and academic discipline which, explicitly or implicitly, is incorporated in his book - a careful critical analysis of the sources. Surprisingly the critics have accepted this as a lesson to be drawn from his work. I quote:

"... Hountondji's book is introduced with an excellent critical history of (West) African scholarship ... 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". (p.10)

Besides that, Hountondji is also concerned with the need for a rigorous scrutiny of the ethnophilosophical literature, though, probably, motivated by different reasons. For example, he mentions the fact that the diversity and contradictory nature of this literature could be easily assessed "if one could overcome one's understandable boredom, read all of them one by one, examine them patiently and juxtapose all the views they contain". (p.20) Secondly, and more important, the theoretical connection made by the critics between the two parts of their criticism is problematic and seems to be grounded on mere academic prejudices. I refer here to their assumption that the recognisance of ethnophilosophical literature as mere ideology would lead to a summary rejection of certain discourses and texts identified as ideological, "without subjecting them to a necessary and detailed political, historical and theoretical analysis". Why? Although Hountondji is probably mistaken that 'African philosophy' has nothing beyond its ideological function of being an indeterminate discourse with no object, there is not enough evidence that the notion of ideology evoked here is an expression of Althusserian thinking. The connection made with Althusser at a time when his thought had no significant projection in the social sciences seems to be a bit artificial. However, even accepting their supposed claims on Althusserian notion of ideology in Hountondji's statements, their objection remains problematic. For ideology, in the Althusserian sense, belongs to the ideologican state apparatus and exists dialectically in interaction with the economic and social base that influences it or conditions it. Thus a rigorous understanding of a social process necessarily requires an understanding of the political, ideological and social practices of the society. Ethnophilosophy viewed in the



above-mentioned sense would be part of these social practices. I would say that what seems to constitute the grounds of Hayes and Nzimande's criticisms is an academic prejudice, i.e. the assumption that ideology belongs to an analytically worthless area of social practice. This is clearly false, although this is not the place to discuss this issue.

There is, nevertheless, another dimension in which Hayes and Nzimande could have based their criticisms. They could accuse Hountondji of falling into another extreme in his claims that 'African philosophy' has nothing beyond its ideological function as a 'smokescreen behind which each author is able to manipulate his own philosophical views'. For to manipulate one's own philosophical views it implies that there are some philosophical problems within the African world or elsewhere. Further, these views, systematised in form of literature, are accepted by Hountondji as the real African philosophy, i.e. "literature produced by Africans and dealing with philosophical problems".(p.24) About this they would, perhaps, argue that although this literature can play an ideological role, there is in it some expression of an African philosophy. Philosophy which, according to Hountondji, should be transformed into "the vehicle of a free and rigorous discussion among African philosophers themselves".(p.34) Hayes and Nzimande are themselves trapped by Hountondji's ambiguity. For example, after accusing Hountondji of dismissing ethnophilosophy too quickly, i.e. considering it ideological and an imaginary effect, they lasted basically assuming his thesis and identifying ethnophilosophy as the 'reality of the unreality' and as being ideological:

"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 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". (Hayes and Nzimande, p.9)

It is suggested here that a task of the philosophers should be the analysis and exposition of that reality of the unreality. Apparently it seems a simple game of quibbling or a play on words. That is not so. Indeed, they have missed the fact that beyond the 'reality of the

unreality' promoted by the ethnophilosophers there is another reality: the reality of African philosophical literature, already recognized by Hountondji, no matter if it has or does not have an ideological function. There is much plausibility that this should be the main concern of the social scientists. This rules out a mere investigation into the African world-view as the main task of African philosophers. The task would be to identify, transform and develop the philosophical reality hidden in the ethnophilosophy tradition. Furthermore, the unreality does not express itself as such through an analysis of it but rather through a concrete analysis of a related concrete reality. In this sense the 'reality of the unreality' is not a starting point or an object which we can analyse and expose. It is itself the result or exposition of the results of an analytical work. Only an analytical work can make it reveal itself as an unreality.

#### Ethnophilosophical tradition in South Africa

There are two main extremes in the tradition of ethnophilosophy in South Africa. There are those who believe that philosophy should be centred and based on cultural diversity, particularly, on ethnic identity, incorporating the values, beliefs and forms of life of each different ethnic group. In this sense, each ethnicity would have a particular world view and, consequently, a particular philosophy. The particular ethnic world-view (often called philosophy of life) would constitute the object of analysis of the philosophers. This view is present, inter alia, in the writings of prominent philosophers like Professor J. Chris Coetzee and Professor P.C. Luthuli. However, Luthuli appeared during the last decade as the most representative proponent of Hountondji's myth of African unanimity within its particular South African version. This is the view that the Black people in South Africa as opposed to the White people have a specific understanding of their world's problems and a particular world-view which constitute their philosophy of life. It is important to note, however, that the ethnophilosophical approach in South Africa has the particularity of being conventional and dominant amongst philosophers dealing with educational problems. For example, philosophers following the line of Coetzee tended to defend the argument that 'in South Africa there is a diversity of cultures, therefore in South Africa we need a variety of 'philosophies of education'. (See Rose and Tunmer, and Morrow, 1984)



This was assumed even amongst the English-speaking White liberals. For example, during 1980 an attempt was made through a distribution of a questionnaire to the English-speaking teachers in the Transvaal to discover their common view on educational matters, i.e. their philosophy of education. In general this was a failure and the last report did not mention any kind of English-speaking philosophy of education. Instead it was referred to as "Attitudes of teachers in English-speaking schools and tertiary institutions in South Africa to education". (Gluckman, 1981). This was proof that within the English-speaking teachers there is still a significant degree of disagreement, though the majority tended to agree (1). The ethnophilosophical conception in this initiative is well illustrated by the words of one of the promoters:

"On many occasions, various members of the TTA had complained that they were expected by headmasters or inspectors to implement the CNE philosophy in their teaching. When they objected to this imposition of an Afrikaans culture on English-speaking children, they were informed that in terms of the 1967 Education Policy Act, it was their duty to do so. Their objection to this interpretation of the Act was met with the question, 'Well, how do you interpret the Act? What do you English believe in anyway?' Either because they had not thought through their educational beliefs, or because they were unable to articulate them in a systematic form, these teachers were unable to give an answer. But even if they had been able to do so, the rejoinder would have been, 'That's just your opinion. How can you prove that other English teachers agree with you?'"

This then was our motivation- to provide such teachers with a systematic philosophy of Education, which, we eventually hoped to prove, had the backing of the English-speaking community". (Gluckman, 1981, p.39)

Amongst the 'Black communities', Luthuli is one of the most representative ethnophilosophers in South Africa. In his D.Ed thesis, A Zulu-oriented Education and School Practice, he articulates the argument that to remedy the problems inherited by the Zulu people historically, education should be Zulu-oriented, i.e. based on the particular philosophy of life of the Zulu. The Zulu philosophy of life, an expression of the Zulu identity, is defined as that "immutable truths, values, sentiments, beliefs and traditions which make them to be recognized as Zulus and as different from Tswanas or Xhosas". (Thembela, 1982, p.27) In his perspective, Zulu philosophy would be the particular world-view of the Zulu people. In his later writings, this concept of philosophy and the

concept of education were broadened and conciliated with more general issues related to the future of South African Blacks (2). The new assumption is that there is a particular view of the world amongst Black people, that is a 'Black philosophy (of education), which expresses itself in 'Black terms' and from a 'Black perspective'. The supposed 'Black philosophy of education' - whether Zulu-oriented, Xhosa-oriented, etc. should be the basis of a Black oriented education.

The formulations of Luthuli raise many problems. As Thembela has pointed out in a reply, there is no way he can escape the charge of supporting the ideology of 'separate development'. (Thembela, 1982) His suggestion of an existence of a 'White perspective' is problematic. The recent debate on Problems of Pedagogics and 'Philosophies of Education for South Africa' constitute a sufficient proof that there has been divergences and contradictory philosophical views amongst the White groups (Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking and even within these large groups)(3). The same divergences exist within the Black ethnicities. And in this case, Professor P C Luthuli resorted to fallacious premises. Take the example of his notion of Zuluness. For him, Zuluness is the expression of what is 'immutable' and timeless in Zulu way of life, i.e. "truths, sentiments, beliefs and traditions". The confusion here results from his belief that there is something 'immutable' amongst the Zulus beyond the colour of the skin. He fails to acknowledge that ethnicity is not a static and motionless entity, but is a dynamic and changing phenomenon. Social and cultural life-styles are in a constant and complex changing process. The Zulus did not escape the integrative pressures of the mass-media and economy, particularly the effects of the migrant labour. Those who fell into the circuit have brought new values, beliefs and life-styles. This is only one example among an almost infinite number of them. The immutability claimed by Professor P C Luthuli is a - historical and as such another myth. The alleged Zulu philosophy remains also a myth and his concern to set up an independent philosophical tree based on peculiarities of the Zulu people and to place himself as an interpreter cannot pass uncontested. Hountondji would correctly argue that if there is any philosophy in Luthuli's works, this is Luthuli's philosophy, though possibly based on Zulu people's traditions. Morrow (1982), who has launched severe criticisms to him would consider these works another



form of 'domestication' of philosophy, a remark implicit in P. Hountondji's book too.

### Conclusion

What is at stake is the blind belief that any society ('community', 'ethnicity' or even race in a particular context) functions as a unitary, monolithic and harmonious unity, where, to use Hountondji's words, 'everybody agrees with everybody else', sharing the same world-view, based on common/particular values, beliefs, sentiments and traditions. Related to this, there is the assumption that particular and specific identities can be established or located at different levels, namely at the level of the ethnicity (ethnic identity), at the level of a continent (African or European or American identity), and at the level of race (White identity or Black identity). A particular set of values, beliefs, sentiments and traditions in general corresponds to each identity. In terms of philosophical practices, this is expressed by a determined and specific perceptions and interpretations of the world phenomena, i.e. particular world-view.

Hountondji has made an important contribution by reminding us that in all these creations there is a myth at work, the myth of unanimity. Those who believe in this unanimity proclaim that it should be the object of (ethno)philosophy, and that the role of the social scientists (philosophers?) would be to describe it. The first problem about this is that the diversity of opinions and views seems to prevail not only from 'identity' to 'identity', country to country, ethnicity to ethnicity but also between different social strata. In terms of philosophical perspectives, without falling into an absolute relativism, it would be significant to consider some of the individual variations. The second problem is about where to locate philosophy, whether at the level of the alleged common world-view or at the level of those who exercise the philosophical analytical activity. Here again, Hountondji is worth credibility in his suggestion that Philosophy is to be located at the second level-of those who pursue philosophical exercise when dealing with philosophical problems. As he has pointed out, this conforms to the universal concept of philosophy "as a methodical inquiry with the same universal aims as those of any other philosophy in the world".

Further, this rules out the risk of 'domestication' of philosophy. Philosophy, more than a body of timeless values, beliefs and sentiments, re-asserts itself as an activity. More than a special structure or body of 'knowledge' it can be regarded as an approach or a particular form of inquiry.

This is not to suggest that traditions have nothing to do with philosophy. A philosopher, to succeed in his/her enterprise needs, at least, a basic understanding of the traditions and the history of the particular society out of which the philosophical problems to be tackled arise. The current beliefs, values and traditions can, to a certain extent, inform or influence his philosophical perceptions, views and options without, nevertheless, changing the nature of his activity. The task of a philosopher as such will remain the same regardless the identity or specificity of the society.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. To follow this debate see "Interchange", Perspective in Education, 5 : 1, March 1981, and Gluckman (1981).
2. See P.C. Lutheli, Towards a Black Oriented Education and also A Philosophical Foundation of Black Oriented Education in S.A. (Dissertations).
3. See Beard and Morrow (1980).

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