

## An Analysis of Hountondji's "The Struggle for Meaning, Reflections on Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa"

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### Abstract

The paper tries to critically expose Paulin Hountondji's book *The Struggle for Meaning, Reflections on Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa*. In this work, Hountondji tries to defend his earlier work *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, rearticulate his positions on ethnophilosophy, sketch his intellectual background and origins and offers a critique of extraversion in African philosophy. Such a critique is used in order to assert the universality of African philosophy and the necessity of developing a rigorous scientific practice in Africa. By analyzing Hountondji's ideas on ethnophilosophy and the ethno sciences, extraversion and the universality of philosophy, I will argue that although he develops a profound critique of the ideological implications of traditional past, folklore and societal wisdom, still on the process Hountondji devalues the value of traditional wisdom for African philosophy and failed to realize the fact that philosophical thought could occur in different forms and modalities.

**Keywords:** Extraversion, ethnophilosophy, re-appropriation

### Introduction

Mainly being inspired by Placid Tempels' Bantu philosophy, there is a debate in African philosophy regarding universality or particularity of African systems of knowledge, and objectivity or embeddedness of reason, knowledge and cognition. Here, one issue of discussion concerns the value of African wisdom, tradition and folklore for African philosophy and whether or not philosophy occurs in one modality or diverse cognitive orientations. One asks, do elements of Africa's past have philosophical inputs or they only serve the ideological operation of the west that pictured African societal life and culture as fixed, static, communal and of having only implicit worldviews. One of the major criticisms of the idea that African philosophy is communal and implicit in its orientation has been forwarded by Paulin Hountondji.

Hountondji's philosophical ventures have always been characterized by the attempt to develop a universal, rationalist, written and individualized philosophy that reflects on scientific practice. He first defended such a conception in his earlier work *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. His later work *The Struggle for Meaning* is an attempt to defend his positions from the critics, rearticulate his positions on ethnophilosophy and offer a critique of extraversion in African philosophy. In his paper, I will analyze the latter work in terms of developing a critique of eurocentrism, ideologism and recognizing the diverse and multifaceted nature of philosophical production on the African continent. In *The Struggle for Meaning*, Hountondji argues that African philosophy is not confined to African culture, ethnophilosophy is an integral aspect of ethno sciences, ideologism and populism, and African philosophy must be perceived as a rigorous discourse reflecting on scientific

practice and emphasizing intellectual responsibility of the thinker.

*The Struggle for Meaning* is divided into three parts and seven chapters followed by an afterword. In part one he situates his intellectual journey and origins, the influence of diverse philosophical ideals and the role of individual life events that dictated his philosophical ideas. Part one is made up of chapter one that deals with Hountondji's life as a student and articulation of rationality as a major problem for African philosophy, whereas chapter two outlines the influence of Husserl and the need for a scientific practice in African philosophy. In the second part, Hountondji develops a critique of ethnophilosophy, looking at the reaction to his examination of ethnophilosophy in chapter three and framing the major points of discussion for African philosophy in chapter four. In part three, he tries to examine the viability of criticisms against his positions from different camps in African philosophy, critique of extraversion and the need to understand African philosophy as a universal, individualized, written and scientific practice. Here, in chapter five, Hountondji identifies the criticism towards his philosophy as a polluted debate which focuses more on polemics and rhetoric than philosophical analysis. In chapter six, he redefines his positions on the value of Africa's traditional wisdom whereas in chapter seven, Hountondji establishes the need for re-appropriation as a critique of extraversion in African philosophy. Finally in the afterword, he summarizes the aims of the book and his intellectual aspirations.

For Oyeshile, philosophy is a rational and critical inquiry that evaluates its own practice as well as the immediate environment. Hence "It is the one discipline that involves by its very nature a constant process of reflection upon itself." (2008, 57) <sup>[14]</sup> In the same tone Hountondji conceives African

philosophy as a universal praxis that reflects on issues of cognition having transboundary significance, although no one can deny that African philosophy also reflects on the colonial legacy and its lasting impact on the life of Africans. Furthermore, according to Ikuenobe, the Universalists like Hountondji, in African philosophy tried to identify common themes of philosophizing across cultures, the traditionalists pay more attention to tradition, custom and indigenous societies. He remarks, "This debate regarding the nature and existence of African philosophy has culminated in two camps, which I shall call the Universalists and the particularists." (1997, 189) <sup>[9]</sup> For the Universalists philosophy is a personal, rigorous, objective exercise that seeks to transcend convention and authority. As such, the problematics that inform the philosophical enterprise must remain the same across cultures. Sogolo identifies different trends in African philosophy depending on concepts used, methodological orientations employed and intellectual influences that exerted a lasting influence. First, he identifies westernized African philosophers who were educated in the west, use western concepts to make sense of reality and take western philosophy as the ultimate standard. Such philosophers try to explore African social life and reality with western philosophical categories. He claims, "there are those who, although Africans by race, have spent a greater part of their lives in Western cultures." (1990, 48) Secondly, another group of philosophers who have a great deal of understanding of both western philosophy and indigenous realities try to mediate the gap between theory and practice, alien ideals and local forms of being. For Sogolo, Hountondji belongs into the second category in understanding African philosophy as a universal practice reflecting on African realities.

Rettová tries to characterize African philosophy in terms of the place given to the usage of language. Here, one sees trends like Hountondji's that doesn't give sufficient attention to indigenous language, understanding features of language and an attempt to mediate foreign and indigenous languages. Here, there is "no reflection of African languages at all" (2002, 136) <sup>[8]</sup> Furthermore, for Lott and Pitman Hountondji's approach in African philosophy alongside Appiah and Wiredu is a critique of attempts to gratify western knowledge and in the process degrading African local cultures. Here, Hountondji's conception of a written philosophy as a criteria is opposed by Oruka who assumes that philosophy as a reflection on traditional wisdom and values doesn't require appealing to one modality and form like a written culture. Hence, "Oruka cites active engagement in critical reflection on the assumptions of one's culture as the only requirement for philosophy - independent of a written discourse." (2006, 153) <sup>[12]</sup>

The Universalist approach in African philosophy tries to divorce philosophy from culture and perceives attempts to limit philosophy to culture as an ideological operation that neglects non-western societies. As such, it "denies that African philosophy should be unique to African languages and cultures." (Mosley, 2006, 191) <sup>[13]</sup> As a Universalist philosopher, Hountondji envisioned Africa's progress in the future, transcending tradition and overcoming the zeal for redemption of the past. As such, philosophical method is not bounded to a given culture, although it does reflect upon contingent facts. Thus, "for him method transcends that content. Philosophical method, which is a particular form of reason, has no country and no place." (Janz, 2009, 64) <sup>[9]</sup> Professional philosophers like Hountondji tried to extend Africa's contributions to philosophy beyond tradition into

individualized and personal reflection on existing realities. Although spatio-temporalities and contexts differ, still the essence of philosophy remains the same.

The paper starts off by situating Hountondji's philosophy as a critique of ethnophilosophy and advocacy of a Universalist orientation. In section one, I will situate Hountondji's intellectual journey and origins, the influences on his philosophy and gradual evolutions. This is followed by the second section where Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy and the ethnosciences is presented. Here the connections of the colonial paradigm and eurocentrism to ethnophilosophy will be presented. In section three Hountondji's analysis of extraversion in African philosophy is presented. Here the connection between intellectual and material extraversion will be presented. Finally in section four, I will try to examine Hountondji's the struggle for meaning in terms of offering a critique of traditionalism and ideology, but failing to affirm traditional wisdom and different forms of philosophical wisdom and intellectual productions.

### 1. Hountondji's Intellectual Journey and Origins

As K. Anthony Appiah in the foreword to Hountondji's book *The Struggle for Meaning* puts it, Hountondji's philosophy has always been characterized by an attempt to combine one's roots in specific cultural values and history with the Universalist essence of philosophical pursuits. Hountondji tried to defend his work from the charge of legitimizing western colonial agenda by elaborating a rigorous and individual account of African philosophy founded on scientific practice. Here, some saw in Hountondji "the mentality of a philosopher unable to tear himself away from the Europe of his education" (Appiah, 2002, xi) <sup>[18]</sup> For Appiah, Hountondji's conception of human knowledge and possibilities is informed not by a theoretical abstraction that borrows its legitimacy from the occident but a philosophical engagement with African realities and values. As such, Hountondji tried "to establish the legitimacy of an intellectual project that was both authentically African and authentically philosophical." (Ibid, xiii) <sup>[8]</sup>

Hountondji believes that his work is generally associated to examining the limits of attempts to understand philosophy in Africa as an implicit, uncritical, communal and traditional thought being expressed under the general notion of ethnophilosophy. As such his project tries to free philosophical analysis from culture, rational scrutiny from being confined to the contextual and thereby restoring the universality of philosophy in Africa. He believes, "where in the past the geographical confinement would have dictated that only African values, African conceptions of ethics, politics and aesthetics, the African theory of knowledge" (Hountondji, 2002, xvi) <sup>[8]</sup> would exist, his approach demonstrated the primacy of the universal over the particular and the rigorous over the implicit.

For Hountondji, there are two sides to the critique of ethnophilosophy. One resides in creating the space for rigorous philosophical research, explicit philosophical engagements and logical explorations by African philosophers. The other is founded in the undermining of the idea that only indigenous values, traditional wisdom and African knowledge constitute philosophy. Such a critique is seen as having "a paralyzing effect." (Ibid, xviii) <sup>[8]</sup> Beyond the two ways of understanding the critique of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji assumes that the analysis of ethnophilosophy must be situated in the scrutiny over the

examination of ethno science which relegated African ways of life to what is static, implicit, traditional and communal.

In chapter one, Landmarks, Hountondji locates the intellectual influences on his philosophical edifice, in French philosophy and its focus on techniques of rigorous analysis and deconstruction, continental philosophy and the rationalist tradition's focus on history, certainty and the subject. Recognizing the influence of Sartre on his philosophy, Hountondji remarks, "that the existence preceded essence strengthened any spontaneous resistance to all forms of fatalism, my rejection of any doctrine that tended to limit man." (Ibid, 4) <sup>[8]</sup> Based on such intellectual origins there is an attempt to introduce a system of philosophy emphasizing actualization, dynamism and universality as horizons of the subject.

Hountondji also recognizes the lasting impact made by Cartesian rationality's explorations of the subjectivity, Derrida's examination of the inner tensions in classical texts, Ricoeur's and Canguilhem's philosophies, on his critique of ethnophilosophy. Beyond such intellectual origins, Hountondji inherits two major lessons are inherited from Althusser's philosophy. The first one resides in underscoring the limits of philosophical critique and emancipation. This is used to emphasize that the quest in African philosophy, is not just a critique of colonialism but also neo-colonialism. He argues, "We wanted real, not nominal, independence, and we denounced imperialism not only in its colonial form, which was disappearing, but also in its neocolonial guise" (Ibid, 10) <sup>[8]</sup> Secondly, using Althusser, one asks, what exactly the role of philosophy is. Is it engaged in a description of reality or positing emancipatory ideals? This deals with, "the nature, object and true vocation of philosophy" (Ibid, 11) <sup>[8]</sup> Here the sudden nature of philosophical transitions and attempts to make sense of science are emphasized.

In Hountondji's philosophical edifice, rationality is something that must be subjected to further examination, in order to understand the bounds of reason and the role of the subject in the production of knowledge. Hence, "rationality is not self-evident. It must be perceived as a problem, a strange paradox." (Ibid, 12) <sup>[8]</sup> Such an analysis of reason is founded on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Husserl tries to explore what is found without mediation in experience, and without being immersed in one's own experience. He tries to understand immediate experience, objectivity and the relation between conscious and unconscious experience. Hountondji is particularly interested in how in Husserl, just like words are actualized through the subject; objects of experience come to life under the subject. Accordingly, "this perception of noise as noise, a perception that is prior to any meaning generating perception-serves as a model for the notion of primary sensible experiences which by themselves are devoid of meaning" (Ibid, 17) <sup>[8]</sup>

Hountondji's analysis of Husserl assumes that we perceive objects in parts and fragments rather than in their totality and that this arises from the essence of the entity being perceived. Subjectivity and feeling are also an aspect of the experience of the object. Hence, "there is no pleasure without an object of pleasure, neither is their displeasure without an object of displeasure." (Ibid, 20) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji's usage of Husserl resides in exploring the diversity of experience and the unity of actuality, experience and temporality. As such, Husserl shows that "the sensual component was integrated in a living temporality, in the flow of intentionality that sustains it, traverse it, animates it" (Ibid, 24) <sup>[8]</sup> How does this empower scientific knowledge production?

Hountondji discussion of Husserl is situated in the context of establishing the link between history, knowledge and praxis and thereby exploring the possibility of scientific and technological knowledge in Africa. Specifically, Hountondji explores how Western Europe perceives others in the scientific apparatus. Here, he remarks, "it was no longer a question of investigating the conditions of a possible transition to science, but of exploring the historical and ideological origins of western gaze on "other societies" (Ibid, 27) <sup>[8]</sup> Defending the universal validity of scientific knowledge against all forms of contextualized truths, Hountondji asks, what is it within experience that allows transcendence over subjectivity.

For Husserl, science is the most refined and qualitative form of knowledge. Still, such an insistence shouldn't be conceived as an ideological advocacy of scientism since science is not accepted for instrumentality but success in creating its own universe of values. As such, "science is the telos of human thought and of life in general." (Ibid, 30) <sup>[8]</sup> Here philosophy is perceived as a reflection on science. Scientific practice is made possible by a written culture which facilitates storing, critique and transfer of knowledge. Science is a knowledge produced by the subject and is to be replicated by others. As such, "for there to be science, a body of knowledge coordinated in a systematic sequence is necessary". (Ibid, 38) <sup>[8]</sup> What science expresses is the initial order of things that is not distorted by the human mind. Furthermore through a gradual evolution and process, the different branches of science discover the foundations of experience.

Hountondji tried to explore the transition from value orientations to factual observation and objectivity of facts to values in the production of knowledge in the sciences. This constitutes the social, cultural and practical utility of science. Hence, "if a move from the normative to the purely theoretical was possible, a reverse move was also a possibility, and nay theoretical proposition could be converted into a normative one" (Ibid, 46) <sup>[8]</sup> This is not realized in Husserl's phenomenology since he resorted to a generalizing theory to explain all forms of cognition. Such a quest stood against novelty, dynamism and temporality. Contemporary mathematics is believed to disprove Husserl's views since, "Gödel's theorem established the incompleteness of any theory richer than arithmetic" (Ibid, 71) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji had a personal interest in exploring the critique of Husserl's phenomenology, still looking at the growing demand for a philosophy grounded in the analysis of African issues, he turned his attention towards philosophy in Africa. He assumes, "I concluded on the urgent need to put an end to the extraverted nature of all European-language African discourse" (Ibid, 73) <sup>[8]</sup> Does this imply that Hountondji abandoned his earlier philosophical pursuits?

Hountondji believes that philosophical pursuits and personal investigations must be mediated. He found such affinity in his critique of ethnophilosophy, where he utilized his interest in Husserl to explore knowledge production in African and possibility of a philosophical practice on science in the African soil. He adds, "This is the task; I set myself since then, through my critique of ethnophilosophy. In the process I realized that this critique did not concern only ethnophilosophy, but scientific extraversion in general". (Ibid, 75) <sup>[8]</sup> This is also a need to redefine African philosophy. There is an urgent need to distinguish between the popular and narrow conceptions of philosophy, one encompassing worldviews and the other one, an analytic encounter. If philosophy is simply located within tradition and popular



wisdom an individual inventory practice and intellectual responsibility will diminish. Accordingly, "Hountondji states that the literature on African philosophy is hampered by a confusion between a popular or vulgar use of the term "philosophy" and a strict, theoretical use of the term." (Jacques, 1995, 232) <sup>[10]</sup> For Hountondji and other Universalist philosophers, the objective and Universalist dimension of philosophy must not be abandoned in the name of African philosophy, relativity, spatio-temporality and folk wisdom. Once Hountondji presents a discussion of his intellectual origins, he proceeds to offer a critique of ethnophilosophy and ethnoscience.

## 2. Critique of Ethnophilosophy and Ethnoscience

In chapter three, Anger, Hountondji tries to describe his intellectual journey from an analysis of Husserl's phenomenology to a critique of ethnophilosophy. He starts off with the assumption that ethnophilosophy is not an African indigenous form of self-affirmation and critique of western discourse. As such, both the colonial sciences and counter critique of the sciences are seen as affirming the same discourse. Hence, "the critique of ethnophilosophy is still largely a western affair, because the ethnophilosophy that it denounces is itself an invention of the west" (Ibid, 79) <sup>[8]</sup> Here one could ask, to what extent could one conceive genuine discourses in African philosophy freed from eurocentrism?

Hountondji firmly believes that we shouldn't subsume Africans and their identities into a totality and structure. Rather than limiting African philosophy to a set of traditional, closed and communal worldviews, one must ask, what type of change could be introduced in the colonial world and how does such a quest facilitate processes of decolonization and emancipation in Africa? He asks, "How can philosophy serve as a foundation to politics, and notably to anti-imperialist struggle" (Ibid, 85) <sup>[8]</sup> Does this imply that all forms of philosophizing are directed at the paradigm of liberation?

What is required is a critique of violence, asymmetrical power relations and negation of Africa by the sciences, rather than a counter narrative and a new myth. Hence, "the myth of white superiority cannot be effectively combated by holding up against it a counter myth" (Ibid, 86) <sup>[8]</sup> as such a resolution cannot be pursued in ethnophilosophy. Amongst the major proponents of ethnophilosophy, Tempels holds the view that only the European could make African worldviews intelligible, whereas Kagame's analysis although better than Tempels in its depth and rigorous analysis, still succumbs to the same generalizing tendencies. Hountondji claims, "I could not accept any more with Kagame that I could with Tempels the claim to be the spokesperson of a culture" (Ibid, 89) <sup>[8]</sup> Beyond its hasty generalizations, how does ethnophilosophy create relations of otherness?

Hountondji criticized ethnophilosophy for failing to take responsibility for philosophical thought in identifying philosophy with the collective views of a cultural group. Such a stand for him is not a negation of African precolonial beliefs, but a plea for a rigorous analysis of different sources of knowledge in Africa. Such a rigorous tradition must be supplemented by writing and the access it provides in storing of data and critical examination. Hence only individual, rigorous philosophical inputs must be given the status of African philosophy. Based on this, "only that which was comparable should be compared not a wisdom with a philosophy, but a wisdom and a wisdom, and if necessary, philosophies between themselves. (Ibid, 93) <sup>[8]</sup> Ethnophilosophy for Hountondji designates the works of

philosophers and the social scientists that equate philosophy with custom, rational analysis with communal views and logical investigation with mythological accounts and it "present the collective world views of African peoples, their myths and folklores and folk-wisdom, as philosophy." (Bodurnin, 1981, 161) <sup>[2]</sup>

Liberating and setting the ground for contemporary African philosophy is also a form of resistance against material, political and other forms of domination. African philosophy must expose the logic of western imperialism that sought to exclude Africa from the world of science and technology. Such deconstruction is partly facilitated by a critique of static, frozen and collective view of Africa as an ontologically distinct universe. Going beyond ethnophilosophy's aspirations, African philosophy is a dynamic area of investigation and, "the African field is plural, like all fields a virgin forest open to all possibilities" (Ibid, 107) <sup>[8]</sup>

In chapter four, The Issues at Stake, Hountondji assumes that many were surprised that his book *African Philosophy; Myth and Reality* took a form of the critique of ethnophilosophy rather than a critical exposition of Husserl's philosophy. Hountondji saw the political usage of ethnophilosophy to create a false affirmation of diversity in Africa. A system of submission to traditional power of rulers and absolutism was promoted in the name of the internal unity of African values. Hence, "Africa's good old tradition was opportunistically invoked, solicited, and interpreted in the service of this act of political control." (Ibid, 111) <sup>[8]</sup> Such ideological advocacy of protecting one's heritage was expressed in language, culture and systems of administration.

Hountondji shares his experience as a student in the University of Zaire to identify the political implications of ethnophilosophy. Here in a climate of repression and crushing of political dissent, he chose to privately conceptualize the relation between ethnophilosophy and dictatorship rather than advocating an active political engagement. After returning to Dahomey, he witnessed the revolution of 1972. In such a context, while recognizing the sentiments that animated the revolution, Hountondji cautioned against a possible degeneration. Although he witnessed economic deterioration and political stagnation, he still expressed his hope for freedom, liberation and respect for individual rights. He proclaims, "independence is possible"-just like independence democracy is possible" (Ibid, 115) <sup>[8]</sup>

The degeneration of governments and internal fascism is a theme that Hountondji explored subsequently. Rather than what the revolution had promised, with the establishment of the people's republic of Benin, Hountondji witnesses centralized authority over fair distribution of power, dogmatic Marxism against popular participation and total suppression of all spheres of political participation. This inspired him to develop a critique of ideology where the ideas standing for truth, knowledge and emancipation in reality satisfy hidden interests and political motives of a given interest group.

Hountondji bridged his critique of ethnophilosophy and political dictatorships, in his concept of ideologism. Hence, he assumes that just like ethnophilosophy reduces the dynamism of a culture to a fixed past and expects conformity to traditional wisdom and values; ideologism uses the idea of cultural difference and affirmation to subjugate the people to an acceptance of traditional authority and power. He assumes, "the critique of ethnophilosophy led, by the same token, into a critique of what I was later to call, "ideologism," which is the use of ideology for purposes of political mystification and subjugation" (Ibid, 122) <sup>[8]</sup>

Any critique of ethnophilosophy must start from recognizing the hidden power motives and interests that it tries to legitimize. Here, tracing the genesis and origins of African philosophy shows that it emerged as a European attempt to study the mind of the other, facilitate effective colonial and neo-colonial administration as well as posit the ontological inferiority of the other. Hountondji remarks, "African philosophy was first a foremost a European invention". (Ibid, 124) <sup>[8]</sup> Such a recognition allows African philosophers to take intellectual responsibility, critique relations of otherness and engage in a rigorous, rational philosophical exercise and to recognize that "the over determination of the concept of Africa is an obstacle to the freedom of Africans." (Ibid, 127) <sup>[8]</sup> Empowering individuals to philosophize is a psychological decolonization aimed at freeing the self. For Hountondji, V.Y Mudimbe also shares his attempt to expose relations of otherness propagated as essence and identity, and the role of the sciences in creating the mental subjugation of Africans. Hence, "to liberate the future, pluralism had to be established" (Ibid, 128) <sup>[8]</sup>

Although most forms of African traditional thought and ethnophilosophy succumb to hasty generalization, Nkrumah's discussion of precolonial and traditional, western culture and religion and Islamic influence in Africa, succeeds in illuminating the diversity of African social life. Affirming the need to introduce an objective dimension to African philosophy, Hountondji assumes that beyond traditionalism, contemporary issues of universal significance must also be discussed in African philosophy. As such, "African philosophy thus set out to explode all theoretical ghettos" (Ibid, 135) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji's dissatisfaction with ethnophilosophy stems not only from the equation of philosophy to mythology and tradition, but also that philosophy's role is fixed to boundaries of the past and custom. This excludes individual reflection and analysis on objects of philosophical reflection that are universal in their essence. For Hountondji, "the location of philosophy has been misplaced, in objects of reflection rather than in the reflective process itself." (Janz, 2009, 27) <sup>[9]</sup>

Based on the assumption that, "ethnophilosophy is the daughter of extraversion," (Ibid, 139) Hountondji sought to expose the exclusion of Africa from proper discourse and scientific knowledge. A genuine understanding of African philosophy must recognize changes ruptures and diverse trends in the African philosophical tradition. Some elements of such an effort include attempts to study differences and complexities in African thought, and a pedagogical initiative that conceptualizes how African identity is framed in the academia.

Hountondji's advocacy of Universalist is a procedure that is meant to exclude unanimous and uncritical worldviews from the realm of African philosophy, rather than a complete denial of the embedded nature of cognition and particular inputs into the world of philosophy. Thus, "Hountondji's main concern is to exclude from philosophy communal worldviews which are not critically examined." (Van Hook, 1997, 390-391) <sup>[17]</sup> Ethnophilosophy affirmed the ontological unique status of African and western modes of cognition, founded on the distinction between communal over individual, unanimous over explicitly and analytic over implicit thought.

In going beyond a critique of ethnophilosophy and the role of politics in African philosophy, Hountondji assumes that philosophy must go beyond Marxist-Leninism and the false alternatives of idealism and materialism, and emphasize coexistence among cultures, individual autonomy and the

universal quest for the truth. He asserts, "To thus preserve unity in difference, all ideological proselytizing had to be abandoned". (Ibid, 147) <sup>[8]</sup> Hence one must disengage ideology and politics and also resist mental and material dependence on the west.

### 3. Analysis of Extraversion in African Philosophy

Starting from Chapter 5, A Polluted Debate, Hountondji tries to defend his critique of ethnophilosophy from thinkers and philosophers coming from different traditions, encompassing local, foreign, materialist and idealist camps. He also assumes that there is a need to disengage the personal attacks from philosophical criticisms, and attempts to distort his views from genuine intellectual critiques. Hountondji starts his discussion in this chapter, by examining the value of traditional wisdom, indigenous cultural values and communal wisdom. In a context where instrumental and technical visions of rationality propagate a break with the past, he asks how one could assert the role of communal wisdom and worldviews. Here Hountondji analyzes the views of Cheikh Anta Diop who believed that every culture decides how it relates to the past but that Africa's history and values being discarded and suppressed by colonialism, must be revitalized and reaffirmed in the present. As such, "history's role, in these conditions, is to give to our people consciousness of their continuity in time". (Ibid, 163) <sup>[8]</sup>

Hountondji appreciated Diop's plea for solidarity and oneness in Africa, and his contribution to decolonization, still he questioned the empirical foundations of Diop's investigations and the supposed relations existing between ancient and contemporary cultures in Africa and other parts of the world. Hountondji remarks, "I still found his proofs about a historical continuity-biological as well as cultural between ancient Egypt and contemporary black Africa insufficient". (Ibid) <sup>[8]</sup> Thus for Hountondji, African philosophy must be situated as a critical praxis in the current context rather than a zeal for the past.

#### 3.1. Hountondji's defense of his Critique of Ethnophilosophy

Hountondji believes that most ethnophilosophers and African thinkers that saw tradition as a foundation of African philosophy were skeptical towards his philosophy of universality. Although some tried to initiate dialogue most of them resorted to polemics and rhetoric. Hountondji appreciated the depth of analysis carried out by ethnophilosophers like Alexis Kagame, he still assumed that Kagame didn't properly articulate his response to the critiques. (Ibid, 164-165) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji objects the equation of folk wisdom with philosophy, and the attempt to exclude the possibility of scientific practice and strict philosophical thought on the African soil. Hence, "If this material had been presented as cultural anthropology or as ethnology Hountondji would have no objection to it." (Hallen, 1995, 383) <sup>[5]</sup> Ethnophilosophy as such discards the individual for an imagined collective identity

Hountondji charges Niamkey and Toure for employing personal attacks against him. First of all, they charge that Hountondji has a personal desire to see himself as the only philosopher within the African soil, due to the fact that he went to the prestigious schools. Thus he assumed that one must inherit "the philosophical knowledge developed by western society" (Ibid, 167) <sup>[8]</sup> Secondly it is charged that Hountondji doesn't clearly articulate the issue, who is a philosopher and how he relates to Africa's traditional past and

contemporary status. Hence, “who decrees that such and such is a philosopher”. (Ibid) <sup>[8]</sup> Thirdly, it is believed that Hountondji’s measure of philosophy as individualistic, written and scientific is a deliberate attempt to “exclude all the philosophers of the oral tradition”. (Ibid) <sup>[8]</sup> In defending his position from such criticisms, Hountondji claims that Niamkey and Toure’s reading of his ideas are deliberately distorted and focus on “a terrorist discourse, a discourse of intimidation whose aim was to frighten”.(Ibid,168) <sup>[8]</sup>

Although he regards most criticisms towards his critique of ethnophilosophy, as being personal, Hountondji still tries to critically consider Niamkey’s ideas on the connection between philosophy and science, as well as the role of the person in intellectual pursuits. First, using the ideas of Althusser on ideological critique, Niamkey believes that rather than being pure and universal science, philosophy is an attempt to expose and understand the workings of ideology. Hence, the “distinction between worldview and philosophy”, (Ibid, 169) <sup>[8]</sup> is an ideological attempt to exclude all non-western forms of knowledge. Secondly, idea of private ownership is totally alien to the African context, and is only intelligible in western capitalism’s ideals of private ownership and accumulation of wealth.

Hountondji also tries to counter the arguments of Niamkey and Toure as developed on their article “Controversies on the existence of an African Philosophy”. Here, an analysis of the orientations and procedures employed in the attempt to define African philosophy is made. Niamkey and Toure started off with the claim that philosophy is not a great conversation where one philosopher builds on the other, but a kind of envelopment and sudden rupture. Here saying that African philosophy must follow the same standards as western philosophy is an ideological move aimed at consolidating western philosophy. Hence Hountondji is seen as propagating an “elitist prejudice that tends to devalue precolonial African thought”. (Ibid, 171) <sup>[8]</sup> As a solution they advocate revitalizing African folklore, traditional views and communal outlooks.

Hountondji believes that what is of a paramount importance in African philosophy is a consensus on the nature of philosophy. Amongst others, Yai assumed that, although Hountondji’s earlier work *African philosophy: Myth and Reality* clearly articulated the problematic of African philosophy, it still discarded Africa’s past for western reason, and also neglected communal wisdom. Yai contends that “it is only on the basis of such a contract with the so-called traditional intelligentsia that an intellectual revolution is possible”. (Ibid, 176) <sup>[8]</sup> For Yai, there are two major orientations in contemporary African thought; one includes the approach of social scientists that use empirical studies to establish the validity of communal wisdom. Yai appreciated such a trend for its “solid field experience”. (Ibid) <sup>[8]</sup> On the other hand, we have an imitation of western philosophy and a philosophy that is divorced from living realities. As such even the issue of existence of African philosophy serves to legitimize western ideology. Still for Hountondji, Yai doesn’t fully interrogate the limits of traditional teaching and grounds for the existence of a philosophical tradition in the African context.

Yai also criticized Hountondji’s claim that philosophy is a rigorous discipline made possible by a personal activity. Based on his idea “it is never the individual that matters. In the final analysis, the individual is explained by the modes of production”. (Ibid, 179) <sup>[8]</sup> For Yai, philosophy must be situated within communal wisdom, and must resist the

monopoly of science and eurocentrism. Hountondji believes that his conception of philosophy is an attempt to map out a space for a rigorous philosophical tradition in Africa, rather than subjecting Africans to neocolonial domination. Besides Yai, Owomoyela argues that Hountondji is against intercultural translation, indigenous African discourses and identities. Hountondji here assumes that he always understood the nature of cultural and epistemological pluralism in the context of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, and “chapter 8 titled “true and false pluralism”. (Ibid, 181) <sup>[8]</sup> Here, he tried to identify possibility of cultural understanding and translation.

Besides the criticism from nationalists and ethnophilosophers, Hountondji also tried to consider the analysis of Marxists and anti-Marxists toward his philosophy. Here, he first discusses the Dahomey Communist Party (PCD) which although it first supported his ideas for the critique of the agents of westernization in Africa and limits of African own forms of critique, still in time developed severe criticisms. The party criticized Hountondji’s efforts for lacking a clear methodology, not paying attention to concrete relations and preparing the ground for the petite bourgeoisie. Hence, its claimed that “Hountondji’s philosophy-makes no place for proletarian ideology”.(Ibid,182) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji responds by asserting that he never saw himself as a Marxist and simply advocated that the limits of Marxism are seen in inner tensions and contradictions. Abdou Toure on the other hand charged Hountondji with being a Marxist advocated personal worship and suppression of individual autonomy.

In trying to respond to his critics, Hountondji started with the assumption that Niamkey and Toure’s attempts constitute not a genuine philosophical endeavor but the attempt to develop a new ground for ethnophilosophy by incorporating the insights of the social sciences. Such an approach constitutes “a cutting-edge ethnography; aggressive, resolute, possessed of science, philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics”. (Ibid, 185) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji envisioned his earlier work *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* as an attempt to explore the orientations, procedures and presuppositions involved in the inception of African philosophy. He also tries to identify certain distortions that emerged regarding the nature of his philosophy. First, he starts with the assumption that he didn’t negate the existence of African philosophy. On the contrary he emphasized African philosophy as a process in the making and something not confined to tradition. He argues, “An African philosophy (an African philosophical literature) exists and has been obviously developing for at least several decades”. (Ibid, 186) <sup>[8]</sup> Secondly he suggests that his philosophy doesn’t stand against communal beliefs or insights but the equation of philosophy with the communal and suppression of individual creativity and responsibility in the process.

For Hountondji, the attempt to realize an authentic conception of African philosophy must go beyond two illusions. First of all, he assumes that we need to resist the tendency to posit philosophy as the solution to each and every human problem. He remarks, “Kant had definitely dealt with this kind of illusion” (Ibid, 191) <sup>[8]</sup> Secondly, he criticizes the attempt to conceive a practical, emancipatory dimension to philosophy thereby revolutionizing relations of material production. Hence, “the other form of dogmatism-is that which consists in expecting from philosophy answers to political, economic, and social problems” (ibid,191) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji believes that even Marx and Engels were aware of the limitations of philosophy, and rather than assigning a practical intent to



philosophy, they introduced a change from speculative philosophy into modes of production. For Barry Hallen, Hountondji was not against culture and traditional wisdom but the fusion of communal thought with philosophy, and societal wisdom with rigorous analysis. The critique of ethnophilosophy as such cannot be separated from attempts to implant the ground for a scientific and technological practice in the African continent. Hence Hountondji “assigns to the development of science and technology in Africa as independent and vital research disciplines in their own right.” (Hallen, 2002, 52) <sup>[6]</sup>.

In the final analysis what is hidden in the name of ethnophilosophy is a populist tendency that subjects reason to emotion, individuals to communal sentiment, and critical praxis for the psychology of the mob. This in Africa is a tool used to suppress the individual to oppressive forms of regime, and the elevation of existing wisdom over inventory practice.

### 3.2. Critique of Extraversion in African Philosophy

In Chapter Six, Rootedness and Freedom, Hountondji tries to highlight the limitations of the different camps in African philosophy and rearticulate his positions stipulated in his earlier work, *The Pitfalls of Difference*. He tries to reexamine the real intent of ethnophilosophers, problems that arise in translating works of ethnophilosophers, and the political implications of ethnophilosophy. Hountondji proclaims, “The time for re-readings had therefore arrived”. (Ibid, 198) <sup>[8]</sup> He states, we must revisit ethnophilosophy, or its philosophical imports in light of understanding other cultures.

First assessing the works of the ethnophilosophy, Alexis Kagame, Hountondji proclaims that he grounded his metaphysical analysis on language. This ends up espousing relativity. Affirming the existence of particular modalities, Hountondji still sought to overcome it in the universal. Using Wiredu he explored context dependent and independent concepts. Wiredu’s appeal to our indigenous language is not embracing of relativity, but exploration of the limits of translation. Hence, “translation is therefore a decisive test. It reveals what, strictly speaking, cannot be universal, being unthinkable in the target language”. (Ibid, 201) <sup>[8]</sup> This also shows the failure of cultural programs and policies.

Hountondji admitted that our conceptions of the world are constituted and individuality is determined by pre-existing horizons. Hence, “the subject is not first, that it is always constituted from an original passivity”. (Ibid, 202) <sup>[8]</sup> Still, he maintained that collective thought exists in both western and non-western societies and doesn’t constitute philosophy. He situated the task of African philosophers in the analysis and exposition of ideology, the need to look at other philosophical traditions aiming at universality and transcending philosophy to uncover hidden problems. Hence descriptive, scientific and philosophical analyses are all required.

For Hountondji, the current discourse on African philosophy is reminiscent of the ancient debate between Socrates and the sophists. Here alongside Plato and Socrates, Hountondji argues for a possibility of discourse. He thus remarks, “Language must be possible” (Ibid, 207) <sup>[8]</sup> Hountondji tried to situate ethnophilosophy in the background of the ethno sciences. He identified a critique of ethnophilosophy in Marcien Towa, and also identified its earlier usage by Nkrumah. What’s important is the extension of studies of otherness into the world of philosophy, although the exact origin of ethnophilosophy is not known. In trying to explore the relation between ethnophilosophy and ethno science, he identified two senses of ethno science. The former refers to

the study of pre-modern knowledge, whereas the latter appeals to the study of pre-modern sciences. Here, “the two uses are irreducible and their ambiguity cannot be eliminated”. (Ibid, 210) <sup>[8]</sup> Above all, he emphasizes the need to study diverse modalities, forms of knowledge and dissemination of transitional knowledge.

Following Smet, Hountondji believes that Tempels’ ethnophilosophy must be studied in the context of the struggle for independence, mental decolonization and the need to affirm the cognitive capacities of Africans. Tempels as such propagated the respecting of others, having a space for their rights and as such “did not hesitate to denounce the brutality of the methods used by the administration”. (Ibid, 213) <sup>[8]</sup> Tempels believed that demonstrating the cognitive capacities of the Bantu is a foundation for asserting their rights. Still, Tempels severely criticized those Bantus that tried to negate their own cultures for alien values. This for Hountondji shows that Tempels still believed in ontological differences between the Bantu and westerners.

Hountondji asks how African intellectuals could identify the limitations of critiques that ended up espousing eurocentrism as well as the restriction of philosophy to the collective and uncritical. He remarks, “I called for a way out of the false alternative between what could be called eurocentrism and, following the African American trend, Afrocentrism” (Ibid, 217) <sup>[8]</sup> Minimal consensus taken as ethnophilosophy is not philosophy but a subject of sociological and anthropological investigations.

For Hountondji, the critique of ethnophilosophy is also applicable to a critique of attempts to create intellectual products for the outside world. In his critique of extraversion, he sees the claims to represent a group and the target of philosophical production being an outside audience. Here, “the question of the value of this knowledge or its degree of coherence and objectivity is eliminated”. (Ibid, 224) <sup>[8]</sup> It is material dependence that leads into mental dependence, and scientific knowledge must go beyond the confines of positivism and instrumental rationality.

Even in the processes of decolonization, Africans still explored and analyzed problematic supplied by western discourse. Here, one sees material, mental and political forms of dependence on the west. African systems of education are giving more primacy to instrumentality and technique than a holistic knowledge. Hence, “our governments openly professed, in matters of science policy, a narrow utilitarianism that put African researchers on guard against the attraction of fundamental disciplines, and that guided them on the contrary toward the applied sciences”. (Ibid, 230-231) <sup>[8]</sup> Some obstacles to the development of an authentic scientific tradition in Africa include an economic reliance on the west and an organizational dependence on western facilities and knowledge production. This is also witnessed in the distance between African and western systems of knowledge.

Hountondji assumes that distance could be understood geographically in terms of ways of producing and disseminating knowledge across boundaries as well as trying to create a space for scientific analysis. Here, one observes, “the result of a process of distancing, of establishing a theoretical perspective that is necessary to constitute the scientific object as object”. (Ibid, 232) <sup>[8]</sup> Practitioners in the social sciences and humanities in Africa are more inclined towards relativity and indigenization, whereas in the study of natural sciences in Africa, there is an overemphasis on objectivity and the universal. Still, “abstract universalism is no better than frenzied particularism” (Ibid, 235) <sup>[8]</sup> and an

interest in other cultures and modalities must be promoted. Such a task also involves allocating a proper place for scientific knowledge production in Africa

Using Thomas Kuhn's analysis of normal science, Hountondji argues that African philosophers and thinkers shouldn't be simple practitioners of western paradigm but must posit anomalous and revolutionary possibilities. He asks, is de-linking or going outside western system and science possible, and wouldn't such a quest lead to forms of inner threat? The solution resides in revisiting our institutions, policies and systems. Hence, "opting out of the system, therefore, first of all meant developing a science policy". (Ibid, 243) <sup>[8]</sup> Here appropriation is a matter of studying diverse models and cultures and taking useful elements. This also constitutes a critique of extraversion in African philosophy.

As a result of extraversion, one sees the attempt to posit oneself as essentially different from others, the empirical study of traditional societies seen as ontologically different, construction of otherness and the university supplying the institutional context for perpetuating relations of otherness. Thus, the university is "creating optimal conditions for the reproduction of mediocrity". (Ibid, 246) <sup>[8]</sup>. The idea that Africans are in a state of cultural lag, discards the scientific and technological achievements of pre-colonial Africans. To stop imitating others one must revisit one's place and ways of being. What is needed is a wager for rationality that tries to revitalize and disseminate African forms of knowledge and also engages in cross cultural learning. Hence, in the final analysis, "rationality is therefore not given in advance. It is still to be built". (Ibid, 258) <sup>[8]</sup>

In the afterword to *The Struggle for Meaning*, Hountondji shows that in the first half of the book, he tried to locate the formation of his intellectual ideas and influences exerted from different sources. In the second section, the critique of ethnophilosophy and its implications in suppressing individual thought is discussed. Hence, "founded on a unanimist prejudice and a reductive reading of African cultures, this type of discourse develops entirely on the backs of the peoples concerned". (Ibid, 260) <sup>[8]</sup> Finally in section three, the consequences of imitating the west in mental and material terms, and what is the possible way out are explored.

#### 4. Examining The Struggle for Meaning's Quest for Universality

In the last three sections, I tried to introduce Hountondji's intellectual background, critique of ethnophilosophy and analysis of extraversion in African philosophy. Here I argue that although Hountondji succeeded in identifying the political and ideological implications of ethnophilosophy, he still discarded African traditional life and wisdom in the process.

In *The Struggle for Meaning* Hountondji correctly identifies that what is involved in the critique of ethnophilosophy is not just a critique of eurocentrism and western ideology, but also suppression of individuals and dynamism for a false sense of uniqueness and diversity that is ideological in its nature.

In *The Struggle for Meaning*, Hountondji demonstrates that Africa's existential predicament results not just from the colonial and neo-colonial paradigms but also internal and domestic manipulations. He clearly shows how ethnophilosophy's quest for the mystic other was implemented by politicians and ideologues to celebrate belongingness to a perfect whole, relations of solidarity and primordial oneness. This helps to consolidate the power of African rulers by emphasizing perfectness and oneness in the

whole. Three crucial concepts in such critique of domestic abuse of power include ideologism, populism and traditionalism. By ideologism, Hountondji shows ideological manipulation of tradition and the past to advocate the unquestionable power of rulers. In populism, he discusses the emergence of a radical thinking that suppresses individual critical inventory and individual innovation for the group. Finally, by traditionalism, Hountondji exposes how the appeal to a given tradition is part of a political program of organizing, ruling and administering native people.

Hountondji believed that philosophy's role in contemporary society cannot be separated from a reflection on scientific praxis. Still, for Henry Hountondji's approach to African philosophy cuts off African philosophy from its deep roots and also fails to recognize the role of African sages in philosophical practice. For Henry, Hountondji believes that philosophy must be grounded in western metaphysics and continental philosophy and as such his "primary concern is for a philosophy governed exclusively by analytic or speculative reason and which conforms to the written canons of modern European philosophy." (Henry, 2000, 64) <sup>[7]</sup> To what extent did Hountondji affirmed the diversity of voices in the philosophical landscape?

The Struggle for Meaning devalues Africa's traditional wisdom and knowledge for a false sense of universality that is not rooted in the local. As critics like Richard Bell have shown, despite Hountondji's criticisms of ethnophilosophy, the useful elements of culture were further appropriated in African philosophy by sage philosophy's exploration of agents of communal wisdom and literary approach's exploration of African forms of art and literature. This "includes critical aspects of certain oral traditions as well as some artistic and literary works of Africans." (Bell, 2002, 21-22) <sup>[1]</sup> Bell recognized the fact that Hountondji only focuses on a narrow, written form of philosophizing.

Hountondji tries to go beyond a false Universalist orientation that affirms western bias as well as traditionalist orientation that is fixed only on folklore and traditional wisdom. Hence, "the universal view does not go nearly far enough according to Paulin Hountondji, and at the same time it goes too far. It goes too far in risking African philosophical identity to the Western bias-using Western philosophy as the measure of all philosophizing-and it does not go far enough in limiting the discussion to the specifics of the African context itself." (Ibid, 28) <sup>[8]</sup> As a solution, he proposes a vision of philosophy that is written, scientific, practiced by Africans and is dialectical in its nature. But to what extent does such a conception empower different modalities of knowledge?

In saying that contents of traditional wisdom could be translated into philosophical materials, Hountondji didn't fully elaborate on why such wisdom could only be articulated by individuals. Hountondji sees ethnophilosophy, communal wisdom and mythological as artistic literature, and scientific literature as historical, pluralistic and rigorous. Still Bell asks what the point of demarcation between philosophy and other forms of knowledge is, and as such, "Hountondji's distinction between "artistic" and "scientific" literature is highly problematic as a way of dividing philosophy from other literary/cultural forms of expression." (Ibid, 30) <sup>[8]</sup> Still, how could African philosophy only be produced by Africans when it has claims to universality?

Richard Bell shows that understanding others is "to see something as it is" and that taking into account the diverse nature of Africa pertains to colonial history-only recent experience with writing and so on, understanding Africans



requires that we look at what makes sense from an African point of view. That is, there are various oral and non-oral, artistic and non-artistic components of the African identity which being critical, dialogical and reflective in their nature helps us to decipher the philosophical thoughts. Hence, "If, as Hountondji says philosophy "writes its memoirs" and "keeps a diary," then such a memoir or diary must include the sharpest oral "ruminations" about human life." (Ibid, 113) [8] If not, then Hountondji project devalues the essence of African traditional life.

### Conclusion

In *The Struggle for Meaning*, Hountondji uses his background in Husserl and continental philosophy to identify the parameters and problematic of African philosophy, critique the unanimism of ethnophilosophy that confines African philosophy to traditional wisdom and also facilitates exploitation of individuals in the name of affirming diversity, uniqueness and difference. He also critiques the diverse orientations in African philosophy that failed to evolve a universal and rational foundation for African philosophy. Taking philosophy as a dynamic exercise, Hountondji's approach resides in continual examination of reality and possibility of scientific practice.

The notion of extraversion being central to Hountondji's analysis shows intimate relations between mental and material dependence, critique of eurocentrism and failure of trends in African philosophy that are limited to custom and tradition. As such, Hountondji's approach although it must be appreciated for developing a critique of eurocentrism in African philosophy, mere imitation of the west and ideological functions of ethnophilosophy, it still must equally embrace the value of scientific and artistic, written and oral, individual and communal orientations for African philosophy.

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