

HOUNTONDI, PAULIN J.

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the illustration depicts a special art coin by Eric Claus; 21 such coins illustrate this book edited by Jos de Mul



Two successive movements (the first one critical and deconstructive, the second one positive and constructive) can be discerned in the philosophical work of the philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji, from the West African country of Benin; their combination qualifies him to join the ranks of today's most significant philosophers on a global scale.

The first movement, embodied in his main work *African philosophy: Myth and reality* (French 1976; English tr. 1983, 1996), consists in the demystification of African thought. It seeks to define the conditions under which we can speak of philosophy in Africa. Here Hountondji flings his notorious minimal definition of African philosophy:

'By "African philosophy" I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves' (1996: 33)

in the face of the so-called ethno-philosophers. The latter wrote on the spur of Placide Tempels' *Bantu philosophy* (1945, published at the height of colonialism by a Belgian missionary critical of the racist denial of Africans' intellectual capabilities). The ethno-philosophers (e.g. the Rwandan A. Kagame) were African intellectuals depicting 'African philosophy' as collective world-view, largely residing in oral language use, unanimously shared by all, and converging over much if not all of Africa. Against this collectivist, pan-African, timeless, oral construct, Hountondji claims philosophy in Africa to be what philosophy has been in the North Atlantic tradition: a genre of specialist intellectual undertaking which is discursive, literate, individual, counter-consensual -- reducing Africanity to a geographical category devoid of a special Black mystique. In understanding the contemporary predicament of people in the African continent, far from celebrating 'negritude', African ontology etc. as the Africans' exclusive birth-right, Hountondji exhorts us to apply the universalist categories of philosophy, of the sociology of knowledge, and of empirical social-scientific enquiry, as set out before us by Kant, Marx, Husserl, Althusser, and the social sciences. Hountondji sums up his deconstruction in the following terms:

'ethnophilosophy appears as a by-product of underdevelopment, a consequence, among many others, of cultural amnesia. Questioning ethnophilosophy is therefore a first step on the long road toward self-recovery and self-confidence. It is a pre-condition for the rediscovery of Africa's age-old civilization and history.' (1996: xxiv)

Here he finds himself in the company of philosophers like the Ghanaian Wiredu, while creating the intellectual space for vocal Africa-related cosmopolitan philosophers of the 1980-90s: Mudimbe, Appiah. In later years Hountondji was to considerably qualify his position in response to passionate criticism, but he has never joined the ranks of African mysticism.

Having opposed -- by an appeal to universalist categories of knowledge and knowledge construction -- the imprisonment of contemporary African thought in self-empowering myths, the second, more recent, affirmative movement in Hountondji's thought inevitably consists in the mobilisation of global -- including African -- knowledge production for the benefit of the African continent's present and future.

'How can Africa appropriate the international legacy of knowledge and know-how and reappropriate its own knowledge traditions in a way that allows mastery of the whole process of knowledge production for the benefit of the majority, not just some?' (Hountondji 1996: xxv)

Meanwhile the demystification of African thought does not mean that Hountondji is opposed to the

far-reaching claims which Afrocentrist scholars from North America and Africa have recently made as to the significant contribution Africa -- via Ancient Egypt -- may have made to global cultural history and particularly to global patterns of specialised philosophical thought. Here Hountondji characteristically advocates replacing the Afrocentrists' pathos by universalising empirical methods of enquiry:

'In the wake of Cheikh Anta Diop's writing, scholars such as Pathé Diagne and Theophile Obenga drew attention to the antiquity and historical depth of African philosophy. This direction of research seems to me particularly exciting. It allows us to put the colonial and late pre-colonial period into perspective and to probe more deeply into Africa's past. It encourages us to look beyond the era of the slave trade. Still, special efforts must be made to find the missing links if we are to establish historical continuity between ancient Egypt and today's Africa. Whatever the outcome, however, we need to disenclose Africa's history and to consider the last four or five centuries, that is, the whole period of integration into the world-market, the period of subjection, and the development of underdevelopment as a parenthesis within the whole history of Africa' (1996: xxiv).

Adopting global knowledge passively, as merely the other's knowledge, is for Hountondji one of the great dangers of globalisation. In a pioneer exploration of 'endogenous knowledge' (1994, tr. 1997) he looks for universalising knowledges in African history, not in an Afrocentrist attempt to celebrate African unique or first achievements on a global scale, but as possible anchorage for Africans' adoption of global knowledges. By the same token Hountondji is currently engaged in the creation, at Cotonou (Benin), of an African Institute for Advanced Study, after the Princeton model. The cornerstone of that institution is to be, not the palaver and the talking drum, but such modern information and communication technology as may reduce North-South inequalities attending access to global knowledge.

BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paulin Hountondji was born in the West African country of Benin in the early 1940s, then part of the French West African colonial empire. He read philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure, Paris (France), and taught philosophy at the universities of Besançon (France), Kinshasa (Congo) and Lubumbashi (Congo), prior to becoming Professor of Philosophy at the National University, Cotonou (Benin). He held senior government posts in Benin. In recent years his international recognition has won him prestigious U.S.A. appointments. His main publications are: *Sur la 'philosophie africaine': Critique de l'ethnophilosophie* (1976), tr. *African philosophy: Myth and reality* (1983, 1996); *Les savoirs endogènes: Pistes pour une recherche* (ed., 1994), tr. *Endogenous knowledge: Research trails* (1997); *Combats pour le sens: Un itinéraire africain* (1997). He is the editor of: *Philosophical research in Africa: A bibliographic survey* (1987-88). A frequent contributor to the Zambian-Dutch philosophical journal *Quest*, he is a member of the editorial boards of: *African Philosophy, Transition*; and *Interventions*. He is a Christian and a church elder.