

Paulin Jidenu Hountondji, 1942–2024

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The history of African philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century cannot be told without invoking the spectre of ethnophilosophy and its nemesis, Paulin J. Hountondji.¹ Hountondji passed away in 2024, having left an indelible mark on the development of African philosophy as an academic field, both on the continent and beyond.

Hountondji was born in 1942 and was thus a teenager in 1960, the so-called ‘year of Africa’, during which seventeen African countries attained independence, including Hountondji’s own country of Benin. As Hountondji tells us in his memoirs, *Combats Pour Le Sens: Un Itinéraire Africain*, his first encounter with philosophy was at the École Victor-Ballot in Porto-Novo, an educational institute for the future elite of Benin.² Hountondji’s philosophy teacher, Hélène Marmotin, must have made an impression on the seventeen-year-old Hountondji for he still remembered the first lesson that she taught him: ‘philosophy has to be learned’.³ Philosophy, for Marmotin, was not a matter of innate talent or intellectual intuition, but hard work and scholarly earnestness: a lesson Hountondji would never forget. Hountondji went on to Paris and enrolled at the Lycée Henri-IV in 1960 to complete his *hypokhâgne-khâgne* – in preparation for entry to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. The subject of his doctoral dissertation, under the supervision of Paul Ricoeur, was Husserl’s conception of science as laid out in the *Logische Untersuchungen*.⁴

Yet Hountondji, despite successfully defending his dissertation in 1970, never published the results of his work on Husserl, feeling he would not be justified in writing primarily for a foreign audience, especially given the political turbulence of the 1960s on the African continent. Hountondji in his 1970 article, ‘Remarques sur la philosophie africaine contemporaine’, had already posed the questions which would exercise him for the rest of his

life: for whom does the African philosopher write? And for whom ought the African philosopher write?⁵ Even as a student he was deeply involved in political debates through *Présence Africaine*, under the editorial leadership of Alioune Diop. From the perspective of African philosophers, there was a demand, and indeed an unbearable pressure, to relate philosophical disputes to pressing questions of national independence. In 1970, Hountondji returned to the African continent as a professor in Zaire, and then in 1972 he became a professor at the National University of Benin in Cotonou. He later held positions as a visiting professor and researcher in different universities across Europe, while always remaining based in Benin. He participated in the democratic movement in 1990 which inaugurated the Republic of Benin; and served as Benin’s Minister of Education (1990–1991) and as Minister of Culture (1991–1993).

Even though Hountondji never published the results of his doctoral research on Husserl, his encounter with Husserl crucially informed the project for which he is most famous: his critique of ethnophilosophy. Building on a series of articles in the late 1960s and 1970s, it eventually culminated in *Sur la ‘Philosophie Africaine’: Critique de l’ethnophilosophie*.⁶ In this book, Hountondji criticised attempts at reconstructing a philosophical system through the ethnographic study of the ‘worldview’ of a particular African people. The entire debate was launched by the publication of Placide Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* in 1945. In this book, the Belgian missionary, based on his missionary work amongst the Luba people in the south-central region of the Congo, purported to have discovered an implicit philosophical system based on a vital force ontology which, according to Tempels, was adhered to by all Africans who speak Bantu languages. According to Tempels, the Bantus believe that being is essentially force and that there is a hierarchy of beings or

forces, and that hierarchical interactions between these forces explain observable phenomena. Tempels' book was celebrated by the circle around *Présence Africaine* – it was republished by the journal's publishing house in 1949 – and eminent African philosopher-statesmen such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, and it came to be seen as providing a model for work in African philosophy.⁷ The dominance of this ethnographic approach in African philosophy in the 1960s is not surprising, since, in Europe, the study of African philosophy was essentially the prerogative of missionaries and anthropologists until the 1960s.⁸

Hountondji argued that such ethnographic projects are ill-conceived for a variety of reasons. First, the researcher almost always projects a philosophical discourse upon material, such as myths, which does not present itself as having any philosophical pretensions. Second, this ethnographic approach to 'discovering' African philosophies presupposes what Hountondji called the 'myth of primitive unanimity',⁹ according to which, in African societies, there is no dissent and everybody essentially agrees with everyone else. Third, this discourse involves implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, a search for an essential difference in kind between African peoples and 'Western' peoples. The positing of an essential difference in kind between Africans and non-Africans was the basis of justifications of colonial rule on the African continent.¹⁰ We can therefore understand Hountondji's suspicion of any discourse that takes reified differences between Africans and non-Africans for granted.

The fourth criticism which Hountondji levelled at ethnophilosophy is perhaps the most important, since it constitutes a thread running through his life's work, starting from his anguish over having to write primarily for a foreign audience as a Husserl scholar. Hountondji argued that the most debilitating limitation of ethnophilosophy is that it is fundamentally directed towards a non-African audience. For Hountondji, ethnophilosophy is essentially a performance that is put on in order to satisfy an 'Other' who occupies a position of power vis-a-vis the performers. Hountondji thought that the other faults of ethnophilosophy essentially stem from this 'extraversion', i.e. the fact of being directed towards an external audience. Extraversion is what explains the overemphasis on African originality: 'the quest for originality is always bound up with a desire to show off. It has meaning only in relation to the Other [*l'Autre*], from

whom one wishes to distinguish oneself at all costs. This is an ambiguous relationship, inasmuch as the assertion of one's difference goes hand in hand with a passionate urge to have it recognized by the Other".¹¹

According to Hountondji, this assertion of difference was encouraged by the 'Other', former colonising powers, especially when the assertion of cultural difference and cultural authenticity was used to mask political and economic dependency. Hountondji's suspicion of any discourse of cultural authenticity was reinforced by his experiences in Mobutu's Zaire. Starting in 1971, Mobutu launched a discourse of authenticity. While engaging in anti-Western posturing, Mobutu supported US interventions in Angola, and established trade ties with apartheid South Africa.¹² It is no surprise, then, that Hountondji was very suspicious of culturalist discourses of authenticity, which, as experience had shown him, were quite compatible with subservience at the political and economic level.

There is indeed a Husserlian strain in Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy. It is clear that Husserl's distinction between philosophy proper as a strict science [*als strenge Wissenschaft*] and pseudo-philosophy, i.e. philosophy as mere wisdom or a worldview [*Weltanschauung*], influenced Hountondji's rejection of ethnophilosophy. One important feature of Husserl's account of philosophy *als strenge Wissenschaft* is that it must be explicitly presented in argumentative form with a clear distinction between premises and the conclusion which is taken to follow from them. There cannot be an implicit philosophy as a strict science, for its hallmark is conceptual clarity and a determinate logical organisation. Thus, on this view, a given people's worldview cannot, by definition, amount to philosophy proper, i.e. philosophy as a strict science. Moreover, Hountondji claimed that philosophy proper, insofar as it requires the clear and explicit presentation of arguments, requires literacy. Hence, there cannot be a philosophy, as a strict science, that is conveyed through oral traditions. It is worth remarking here that while Hountondji was primarily focused on African philosophy, his critique of ethnophilosophy remains relevant to contemporary discussions about Indigenous philosophy in the Americas.¹³

The ethnophilosophers, from Hountondji's Husserlian perspective, were guilty of equivocation regarding the word 'philosophy'. Not only that, but they were also

guilty of another unforgivable sin in Hountondji's eyes; they were guilty of contempt for Africans. They wrote as if a mere worldview is good enough for Africans as far as philosophy goes. Hountondji thought that what appears as a gesture of generosity on the part of the likes of Tempels was really a gesture expressing contempt. The idea that one must lower one's standards when it comes to Africa was particularly loathsome to Hountondji, who would return to this problem in his later writings on scientific dependency.

It is also evident that Husserl's modernist attitude in relation to the relentless demand for rational justification, and the suspicion of whatever is inherited from the past, is carried forward towards an emancipatory project in Hountondji's own work. Hountondji would doubtless agree with Husserl that all received traditions and prejudices must be treated with suspicion by the philosopher.¹⁴ In other words, philosophy proper presupposes individual autonomy. This Cartesian aspect of Husserl's project appealed to Hountondji, who was, above all, concerned with establishing the necessity of the individual autonomy of the thinker. That is, Hountondji sought to demonstrate that anybody who wishes to see African philosophy flourish must also work towards the institutionalisation of guarantees for individual autonomy. Only a fully autonomous subject can dare to attempt a project as bold as Descartes' or Husserl's. Hountondji was very clear about the political stakes in his critique of ethnophilosophy. He saw himself as defending the autonomy of the individual which he thought is a necessary condition for the development of a rigorous philosophical discourse. He would emphasise this point again in the 1980s in a series of articles, especially in his 1982 article 'Occidentalisme, élitisme: Réponse à deux critiques'.¹⁵ In this article, he indicated that there was a political motivation behind his critique of ethnophilosophy insofar as he thought it was a cover for the ideology of group domination which sought to crush individual freedom.¹⁶

Hountondji's concern for the autonomy of the individual did not make him a liberal philosopher. In fact, Hountondji's work is deeply marked by his encounter with Marxism as articulated by Louis Althusser. Hountondji attended Althusser's seminar on *Capital* as well as Althusser's lectures on 'Philosophy for Scientists'. Hountondji, in his memoir, claims that he was deeply

influenced by Althusser's contention that philosophy as a theory of science should cease to pretend to have a foundationalist project with respect to the sciences. Instead, philosophy should take as its task the retrospective description and systematisation of the real procedures of the sciences. Here we can see that the influence of Althusser and Husserl pulled Hountondji in opposite directions.¹⁷ From Althusser, Hountondji also adopted a historical materialist approach to the history of philosophy and history of science which he would retain for the rest of his life.¹⁸ According to this approach, the history of philosophy is parasitic on the history of science, which in turn is parasitic on the history of technology as well as economic and social history. Thus, the history of philosophy cannot be explained independently of wider socio-historical developments. In the parlance of contemporary discourse about the historiography of philosophy, we could say that Hountondji was an externalist.¹⁹

Hountondji applied this approach to the history of African philosophy. Aside from showing the limitations of ethnophilosophy as an approach to African philosophy, he also attempted to explain why so many African philosophers and leaders, such as Senghor, found it appealing at this particular historical juncture. Hountondji argued that ethnophilosophy was itself a by-product of underdevelopment and a weak post-colonial petty bourgeoisie that is incapable of carrying out an economic and political struggle for real independence, and which therefore seeks to transform the struggle for real independence into an exclusively cultural struggle centred on assertions of cultural authenticity and difference.

From Marxism, Hountondji also took on a deflationary view of philosophy. Hountondji in an important article published in 1981, 'Que Peut la Philosophie?',²⁰ would turn to Marx and Engels' critique of Left Hegelianism to criticise those who thought that Africa's salvation is to be had through philosophy. Doubtless, Hountondji thought that philosophy can play an important role in the transformation of African societies but only if it gives up on its delusions of autonomy vis-à-vis the first order sciences and social reality. Hountondji remarked that many look to philosophy 'for miracles. They require of philosophy to solve all problems: metaphysical problems of the existence of God, of the nature of man, of life after death, etc. Political problems, economic, social, of ways and means of national liberation, of the emancip-

ation of the exploited masses, briefly, of revolution'.²¹ Philosophy, according to Hountondji, cannot do any of these things. At most, philosophy can clarify to us certain key concepts, but it cannot do more. To do more we have to 'get out of philosophy'.²² One also suspects that, in adopting this deflationary approach to philosophy, Hountondji was trying to protect the autonomy of African philosophy from incessant pressures to contribute directly to political and social movements. We could say that Hountondji was attempting to demonstrate that philosophy is not, in fact, too important to be left to the professional philosophers.

As a philosopher who believed that philosophy is parasitic on first-order scientific discourse, it is no surprise that Hountondji would concern himself with the fate of the empirical sciences on the African continent in the 1990s and the first two decades of the 2000s. It is unfortunate that this aspect of his work has not received the same level of attention as his more well-known critique of ethnophilosophy. For arguably it is in these writings that Hountondji really showed us what it means to 'get out of philosophy' without entirely abandoning philosophy. For example, in his 1990 article 'Scientific Dependency in Africa Today', Hountondji drew on philosophy of science, history, sociology of knowledge and dependency theory, as articulated by Samir Amin, to present an account of the nature and causes of scientific dependency on the African continent.²³ Among the indices of dependency that he discusses is the fact that African scientists write primarily for an audience situated in the Global North and they work in research paradigms that have been mostly developed in the Global North. Here we see the spectre of extraversion rearing its head again.

Hountondji never really developed a fully worked out account of how Africans can overcome scientific dependency. However, he did recognise that it would require a clarification of the relationship between what he called 'endogenous knowledge' on the one hand and modern science on the other hand. Hountondji's attitude towards endogenous knowledge was neither celebratory nor dismissive. Instead, he thought that what one must do is test the claims that are made by the practitioners of endogenous medicine, rainmakers, astronomers, and so on, using the methods of hypothesis testing that are deployed in the modern empirical sciences. It is only after having passed through these tests that these claims

to knowledge can acquire the epistemic warrant that is necessary for becoming scientific knowledge properly so-called. Hountondji was quite hostile to purely descriptive approaches to the ethnosciences which sought to record endogenous claims to knowledge without testing them. Hountondji attempted to develop a different approach to the ethnosciences that would be concerned with questions of truth-value and justification as opposed to the discovery of mere intellectual curiosities. One important outcome was the volume he edited, *Les savoirs endogènes: Pistes pour une recherche*, where Hountondji lays out in the introduction some of the central concerns that animated his research agenda for the last two decades.²⁴

Hountondji has been accused of both mindless servility towards the 'West' (a category that Hountondji himself was not keen on),²⁵ as well as adopting a dogmatic rejectionist stance towards modern science.²⁶ Some of his critics never quite understood that his concern for the development of an autonomous modern scientific discourse on the African continent was not the product of servility towards the Global North but rather was animated by the desire to overcome such servility which today, we must all admit, stands simply as a *fait accompli*. It is all very well to declaim against colonialism and neo-colonialism on the African continent, but these declamations ring hollow when one has to stand in line, hat in hand, waiting for crumbs. It makes little difference whether these crumbs take the form of vaccines, military equipment, loans or cash aid. Perhaps Hountondji's most valuable insight for us today is that any emancipative discourse in African philosophy must start out from the concrete material fact of dependency and domination and eschew any Left-Hegelian temptation to convert material subordination to a purely philosophical issue which is to be resolved, as if by magic, by decolonising the mind.

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Notes

1. Parts of this text draw upon and are informed by the author's recently published book, *Paulin Hountondji and the Science Question in Africa* (New York: Springer, 2025).
2. Paulin Hountondji, *Combats Pour Le Sens: Un Itinéraire Africain* (Cotonou: Editions du Flamboyant, 1997). English translation: *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on*

Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa, trans. John Conteh-Morgan (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002).

3. Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, 3.

4. Paulin Hountondji, 'Why Husserl in Africa? Autobiographical Reflections', in *Phenomenology in an African Context: Contributions and Challenges*, eds. Abraham Oliver, M. John Lamola and Justin Sands (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 63–77.

5. Paulin Hountondji, 'Remarques sur la philosophie africaine contemporaine', *Diogenes* 71 (1970), 120–140. This article would later be republished as the first chapter of *Sur la 'Philosophie Africaine'*.

6. Paulin Hountondji, *Sur la 'Philosophie Africaine': Critique de l'ethnophilosophie* (Paris: François Maspero, 1977). English translation: *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (2nd Ed.), trans. Henri Evans with the Collaboration of Jonathan Rée (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

7. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1965), 36.

8. Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 154.

9. Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, 60.

10. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Kampala: Makerere Institute of Social Research, 2013).

11. Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, 44.

12. Winsome J. Leslie, *Zaire: Continuity and Political Change in an Oppressive State* (London: Routledge, 2019 [1993]), 151–159.

13. See for example the discussion about the distinction between philosophical sources and philosophical texts in Jorge Sanchez-Perez, 'Beyond Gatekeeping: Philosophical Sources, Indigenous Philosophy, and the Huarochirí Manuscript', *Metaphilosophy* 55:3 (2024), 365–280, as well as the discussion about the seeming absence of explicit argumentation in Aztec philosophy in Robert Eli Sanchez Jr., 'Review of *Aztec Philosophy: A World in Motion* by James Maffie', *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2014), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/aztec-philosophy-understanding-a-world-in-motion/>

14. Among these traditions and prejudices is Euro-

centrism, which Husserl himself fell victim to. For a compelling Hountondjian critique of Husserl on this point, see Carmen De Schryver, 'Philosophical Universality in Crisis: Hountondji's Interruption of Phenomenology', in *Phenomenology in an African Context: Contributions and Challenges*, eds. Abraham Oliver, M. John Lamola and Justin Sands (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 99–124.

15. Paulin Hountondji, 'Occidentalisme, élitisme: Réponse à deux critiques', *Recherche, pédagogie et culture* 56 (1982): 58–67. English translation: 'Occidentalism, Elitism: Answer to Two Critiques', *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* 3:2 (1989), 3–30.

16. For a helpful account of Hountondji's conception of pluralism, see Thomas McGlone, Jr., "'No Less Than a Complete Revolution': On Paulin J. Hountondji's Negative Pluralism", *Symposium* 26:1/2 (2022), 242–259.

17. For a detailed account of this problem, see Zeyad El Nabolsy, 'Paulin J. Hountondji on Philosophy, Science, and Technology: From Husserl and Althusser to a Synthesis of the Hessen-Grossmann Thesis and Dependency Theory', in *Africana Studies: Theoretical Futures*, ed. Grant Farred (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022), 34–64.

18. Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, 97.

19. For an example of the externalist approach, see Joseph M. Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structures in Ancient Greece: A Sociology of Greek Ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

20. Paulin Hountondji, 'Que Peut la Philosophie?', *Présence Africaine* 119 (1981): 47–71. See also the English translation: 'What Philosophy Can Do', *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* 1:2 (1987): 2–29.

21. Hountondji, 'What Philosophy Can Do', 8.

22. Hountondji, 'What Philosophy Can Do', 13.

23. Paulin Hountondji, 'Scientific Dependence in Africa Today', *Research in African Literatures* 21:3 (1990), 5–15.

24. Paulin Hountondji, ed., *Les savoirs endogenes: Pistes pour une recherche* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1994). English translation: *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997).

25. Samuel Oluoch Imbo, *An Introduction to African Philosophy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 88.

26. George L. Simpson Jr., 'Review of *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails*', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 32:2/3 (1999), 565–567.