

OBITUARY

OUR MEMORY OF PAULIN HOUNTONDJI LIVES IN THE FACT THAT WE CAN INTERACT WITH HIS IDEAS

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In the month of February, we received news of the passing away of a philosopher of repute of African descent. We may have come across different tributes¹ in honour of this renowned philosopher by the name of Paulin J. Hountondji (1942-2024), who, until his death, was active as a scholar. Paulin Hountondji's demise at the ripe old age of 81 came as a shock to academics all over the world because he was a giant of intellectual achievements. Undoubtedly, like his emergence, his exit will also shape the trajectory and raise some unending debates and dialogues in the direction of African philosophy. Born in the first half of the twentieth century, Paulin Hountondji's influence began to strengthen throughout the second half, especially in the 1970s. Hountondji's intellectual journey crossed paths with many institutions that emboldened and validated his scholarship, such as the University of Düsseldorf, Germany; the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington, D.C.; the W.E.B. DuBois Research Institute, Harvard University; the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies; and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), where he engaged in ground-breaking projects and made invaluable contributions to the advancement of scholarship. He also became a member of CODESRIA's Executive Committee and Vice President of the organisation. It is clear that those who studied philosophy in the 1980s were greeted with his works.

As an outstanding intellectual figure and a distinguished scholar who shaped the discipline of philosophy, he advanced unparalleled insights and paved the way for new thinking in the field of African philosophy. When one surveys the intellectual landscape of Africa, it is a given that there are some thinkers who encapsulate a profound understanding of philosophy on the continent.

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1 Cf. Osha and Hountondji (2024); CODRESRIA (2024); Nossiter (2024); STIAS (2024); Okeja (2024).

These thinkers, in turn, have made it their duty to ensure that many people in Africa become beneficiaries of their legacies. Hountondji is one of those thinkers of rigorous scholarship and a critic who has left an indelible mark on African philosophical discourse. His incisive analysis and commitment to a scientific approach to African philosophy have fostered a platform from which contemporary scholars continue to engage with philosophical debates to this day. To understand the force of his influence, one needs to know that one of his earliest ideas can be found in his book *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, which was published in French in 1976 and in English in 1983). It is significant that over forty years after its authorship, the relevance of this monograph still echoes around the globe. This is evidence that Hountondji was a futuristic scholar who was not subsumed by momentary benefits.

Most notable in his ideas is his definition and classification of the works of early African philosophers as ethnophilosophy or ethnology, as the case may be. Being a concept he popularised in the twentieth century, ethnophilosophy refers to a collective body of wisdom that is perceived to be the same in sub-Saharan Africa. Hountondji always reminded us in his works that this line of reasoning devalued individual contributions to scholarship, and as such, the prior claim in Africa that ideas were generated and owned by the community makes scholarship lack credibility. This homogenised and traditional classification effectively denies philosophers in Africa the agency and critical engagement that are hallmarks of philosophical practice.

In his quest for the liberation of the African mind from the relics of colonialism, Hountondji's admonition to ethnophilosophers is that the limitation of African philosophy to traditional thinking emboldens the colonialists' claim that African ways of reasoning lacked the tool of critical rationality that is the main feature of philosophy. Hountondji enjoins African scholars to abandon the mythical image of African unanimity in favour of acknowledging the continent's philosophical pluralism and the capacity for individual critical thought. To this end, he emphasised the need to align African philosophy and ideas in general with standards that are recognised and methods that are scientific. He refers to the scientific method not as a western tool but as a universal criterion that sound ideas should be eager to adopt. Hountondji is an advocate for an epistemological shift from ethnophilosophy towards a disciplined, reflexive, and systematic African philosophical tradition. His call aimed at fostering a community of African philosophers engaged in the creation of knowledge through rigorous debate and intellectual works that go through the scrutiny of the peer review process to ensure that they are on similar, equal footing with their counterparts from other parts of the globe.

Hountondji has been aptly described as a transcultural philosopher who was involved in issues that are universalisable but from a definite location (Dübgén and Skupien, 2019, p. 2). This explains why philosophers from different cultures around the world can study and domesticate his ideas. His advocacy is for more balanced and nuanced approaches that recognise both universal and particular perspectives. Hountondji's position on universalism can be seen as a call for a more inclusive and diverse philosophical landscape that acknowledges the contributions of all cultures and traditions. Hountondji disowned a kind of scholarship that is based on the defence of folklore as the basis for comparison with the West. He advised that such an endeavour does not bring about the development of Africa. The danger of such a voyage is that it is done in fulfilment of western intrigues and encourages an adverse form of particularism. Paulin Hountondji was also engaged in a critique of the imposition of western universalism on philosophical traditions from the global south. However, he did not dismiss universalism, as he saw it as a critical part of development. In fact, he supported universalism to the point where he proposed that theoretical issues should have practical applications. He acknowledged the importance of universal principles and values in fostering dialogue across different cultures. "On the contrary, it is to be hoped that when Africans start discussing theoretical problems among themselves, they will feel spontaneously the need to gather the broadest possible information on the scientific achievements of other continents and societies. They will take an interest in these achievements not because they will be held to be the best that can be attained but in order to assess more objectively and, if necessary, improve their own achievements in the same areas" (Hountondji, 1983 [1976], p. 68).

In *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa* (2002), Hountondji provided a critical examination of the African philosophical outlook. He focused on the hegemonic outlook of western philosophy through its dominance in the African space, which tends to absolutise western thoughts, and the fact that there is a need for an African philosophy with an emphasis on African problems. He advised that with such a focus, there would be some sense of cultural integrity that would also engineer genuine democratic development on the African continent. Hountondji believes that philosophy is a discipline that involves the abstraction and refinement of ideas through rigorous criticism. Philosophy cannot be merely inspired by culture or serve as a gateway to promote culture. It must detach itself at some point from culture in order to attain some level of certainty that is inspired by universally applicable

methods. A philosopher can be inspired by culture, but he must transcend it. In this work too, Hountondji reiterated his critique of African philosophy as ethnophilosophy that is based on collective agreement instead of critical individual reasoning. He criticised this ethnophilosophical endeavour for its reductionist African intellectual practices and argued for a more critical approach that recognises the diversity and depth of individual philosophical contributions.

At the core of his philosophy was a firm belief in the power of authentic African intellect to reclaim the narrative that had long been distorted by imperialistic perspectives. He was an advocate for an approach that shifted the emphasis from Euro-centric interpretations to a focus on indigenous accounts of knowledge. However, he did not limit himself to indigeneity because of his belief in the global application of knowledge. This led to his proposal of an endogenous form of knowledge that solves problems from a global perspective. His focus is on the fact that the African continent needs development. But for such a development to be initiated, there has to be an interrogation of the raw materials that we bring to the table through the lens of a rigorous scientific method. It is worth noting that this African philosopher did not philosophise in a vacuum; he matched his ideas with action by being involved in different aspects of governance and rose to the position of a Minister of National Education and then a Minister of Culture and Communications in the Republic of Benin. These were political positions he felt motivated to engage himself in as a fierce critic of the military regime that predated his involvement in democratic governance. However, he resigned in 1994 and returned to the university. The depth of his philosophy also calls for cautious reading, since his ideas have been misunderstood by some of his critics. As a scholar, Paulin Hountondji approached his critics with decency, focusing on issues to the point that he created room for dialogue. What is clear is the fact that, irrespective of his critique of the way philosophy is approached on the African continent, his overall aim was to see how to improve the African condition holistically.

Paulin Hountondji's physical absence will be felt hardest by those who had the opportunity to know him and by those who were directly under his scholarly tutelage. At the same time, the substance of his presence lies in the ideas he has produced, which arguably have been read and have influenced more people who have never encountered him physically. In all this, we are reminded of the value of the absence of an individual who left notable intellectual footprints in the sands of time. He is, in the African sense, a true intellectual ancestor who will continually contribute to the development

of the intellect of individuals and African society at large. He is already a guide, helping present and future philosophers separate relevant from less consequential ideas.

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