

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY BEYOND UNANIMISM: A ROUNDTABLE IN HONOUR OF PAULIN J. HOUNTONDI

[Date: 27 March 2024, TIME: 5-7 pm (Nigeria Time), 6-8 pm (South Africa Time)]

Organizers: Conversational School of Philosophy (CSP), Calabar, Nigeria,
and The Centre for Phenomenology in South Africa (CPSA), University of Fort Hare, South Africa.
Convenors: Dr. Amara Esther Chimakonam, Dr. Miriam Ngozi Alike and Dr. Aribiah David Attoe

...Unanimism—the illusion that all men and women in such societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues, ...is the real cornerstone of ethnophilosophy.

(Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 1996: xviii,174)

The aim of this tribute roundtable is to critically discuss the late Prof. Paulin J. Hountondji's (11 April 1942— 2 February 2024) contribution to African Philosophy. Hountondji's criticism of ethnophilosophy as "unanimism" —communal worldview—provoked a great debate among African philosophers on the meaning, scope, nature, method, and logic of philosophy in Africa. At the core of his criticism is the quest for universalism and scientism in African philosophy.

In 2023, Prof. Olivier Abraham, the Director of the Centre for Phenomenology in South Africa, and other colleagues published an anthology, *Phenomenology in African Context: Contributions and Challenges*, that lends a new voice to this debate from an African phenomenological perspective. In discussing Hountondji's contribution, we will revisit this great debate and generate new discussions in African philosophy.

LOGIN DETAILS

Zoom Link: <https://wits-za.zoom.us/j/98665776671?pwd=V0F3cjFpTlhvekc2QUtiaDRNb3Vmdz09>

Meeting ID: 986 6577 6671

Passcode: 051510

Welcome 6:00-6:05

Dr. Amara Esther Chimakonam (University of Fort Hare)

Talk 1: 6:05-6:35

On Paulin Hountondji's Primary Concepts

Prof Sanya Osha (University of Cape Town).

Paulin J. Hountondji made his name in the discipline of philosophy with the introduction and analyses of relatively few but important concepts. Indeed, his contributions were seminal and well timed. First, he began with a searing indictment of the anthropology spawned (pseudo)discipline of ethnophilosophy. And he then launched yet another powerful critique of unanimism, followed

by well-regarded analyses of the question of scientific dependency in Africa. Finally, he extolled the significance of fostering endogenous knowledge on the continent. This, hopefully, sums up Hountondji's contributions to the conceptual advancement of modern African philosophy. This discussion attempts to evaluate the impact of this conceptual approach on the study of philosophy in Africa.

Short Bio: Sanya Osha holds a PhD in Philosophy and taught the discipline in Nigerian universities for a decade. He has published extensively on anthropology, cultural studies, knowledge systems of Africa, the politics of the West African region, and the sociopolitical and cultural realities of Southern Africa. He has undertaken extensive research on the discursive status of African systems of knowledge. He also spent a decade studying and teaching the sociological and political aspects of innovations studies. As an academic, he has held research positions at Smith College in the USA, the University of Groningen and the African Studies Centre in the Netherlands, and in South Africa at the Universities of Kwa-Zulu-Natal, University of South Africa, and the Africa Institute for South Africa (AISA). He has also delivered lectures at University of Johannesburg and the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Some of his publications include, Kwasi Wiredu: The Text, Writing and Thought in Africa (2005), Postethnophilosophy (2011), African Postcolonial Modernity: Informal Subjectivities and the Democratic Consensus (2014), Dani Nabudere's Afrikology: A Quest for African Holism (2018) and Ken Saro-Wiwa's Shadow (Expanded Edition): Politics, Nationalism and the Ogoni Protest Movement (2021).

He is currently a visiting professor at the Centre for African Studies (CAS)/Department of African Studies and Linguistics, University of Cape Town after having served a stint at the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), UCT, as senior research fellow.

Talk 2: 6:35-7:05

Expanding the Boundaries of Philosophy: Paulin J. Hountondji on Endogenous Knowledge
Dr. Carmen De Schryver (Trinity College).

This paper seeks to reassert the importance of meta-philosophical questions concerning the nature of philosophy for ongoing debates surrounding philosophical diversification and canon expansion. I do so by turning to Paulin J. Hountondji's philosophical oeuvre and its preoccupation with the relationship between "philosophy" and what he comes to term "endogenous knowledge". Although Hountondji has been cast by some as offering a Eurocentric understanding of philosophy, I argue that this is not the case at all. On the contrary, I contend that his work contains significant resources for broadening our sense of what counts as philosophical without thereby sacrificing the integrity of the philosophical endeavor. For Hountondji, this depends upon cultivating the right attitude to endogenous knowledge – one that neither presupposes nor denies its philosophical significance. This determination to take African knowledge traditions seriously underlies, I argue, Hountondji's "early" as much as his "late" interventions; a subsidiary argument made in this paper is thus that there is a continuity traversing Hountondji's philosophical work. My ultimate aim, however, is to

examine and defend Hountondji's view, showing that his meta-philosophical vision has profound ramifications not only for African philosophy but for philosophers working in all traditions of thought.

Short Bio: Carmen De Schryver is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College. She works in the areas of Africana Philosophy and Phenomenology. Her research has appeared in *Husserl Studies*, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* and in the edited collection on *Phenomenology in an African Context*. She is the author of the forthcoming book, *Phenomenology Beyond Eurocentrism: Hountondji and the Promise of Universality*, under advance contract with Indiana University Press.

Talk 3: 7:05-7:35

Unanimism and the Possibility of a Communal Mind

Prof. Edwin Etieyibo (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

What is wrong with unanimism? We can also ask the question: What is wrong with a communal mind? Both questions, I think, form the fulcrum of many years of work of Paulin Hountondji and his criticism of ethnophilosophy. In this presentation, I build on some earlier work in defence of the plausibility and possibility of ethnophilosophy by demonstrating that the question of unanimism, communal mind or ethnophilosophy turns on a particular understanding of philosophy and rationality. This understanding and what I take to be central to Hountondji's criticism, proscription, or argument against ethnophilosophy can be formatted as follows.

1. Philosophy is a purely rational activity or rationality ($P = R$)
2. Rationality is a property of an individuated or individual mind ($R = I$)
3. Therefore, philosophy is a property of an individuated or individual mind ($P = I$)

On the basis of this argument, the conclusion is drawn that ethnophilosophy (as unanimity of thought, beliefs, and consciousness) is not plausible. I engage with this argument by raising doubt for premise 2. I argue that such doubt leaves open the door for the possibility that philosophy can both be a property of an individuated or individual mind as well as of a communal mind.

Short bio: Edwin Etieyibo is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand and an Adjunct Professor at the University of Alberta. He works primarily in African philosophy, ethics, applied ethics, social political philosophy. He has authored, edited and co-edited so many books and articles.

Professor Etieyibo is the co-founder and Secretary of the African Philosophy Society, a pan-African organisation that organises research clusters among African philosophers and mentors promising and young scholars in African philosophy. He is presently the Head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand

Discussion: 7:35-7:55

Closing/Vote of thanks: 8:00