The Philosophical Status of Native African Systems of Thought: A Case for a Balanced Approach

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Introduction

Independently of whether or not one thinks they should, discussions surrounding the philosophical status of particular systems of thought stand at the centre of much of the work that has been done within comparative philosophy. In particular, as far as comparisons between Western and non-Western traditions are concerned, the main form that these attempts have taken is one of trying to determine the extent to which a non-Western tradition can be considered to be philosophical in the Western sense, and thus able to be fit into those criteria based on which the Western tradition tends to determine the philosophical status of a determinate system of thought. This thesis' aim will be to examine the debate surrounding the philosophical status of native systems of thought within African philosophy. I will then highlight how, although they do not follow strict Western philosophical criteria, their contributions to the field of philosophy should not be ignored.

In order to do so, I will firstly examine the debate between the two philosophical trends of ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy, so as to examine the two main arguments for and against the philosophical status of native systems thought. Secondly, I will explore the possible philosophical contributions which the African concept of community could provide us, in order to prove that African native thought, while not strictly philosophical in the Western sense, should nonetheless be taken into account within modern topics and discussions.

Four Trends of African Philosophy

The philosophical tradition of the African continent has followed a very distinct trajectory when compared to Western philosophy, not only because of the continent's history during colonialism, a period within which the 'natural' development of African cultures and their systems of thought was deeply influenced and at times completely stopped by colonial administrations and their barbaric methods, but also because of the very nature of the tradition itself before colonialism. African philosophy finds itself in a unique situation also when compared to other distinctively non-Western traditions, such as ancient Chinese philosophy, Buddhism and Indian vedantic philosophy. This difference stems from the nature of pre-colonial systems of thought in Africa, which were not textual traditions and did not

focus on the preservation of their world-views by way of writing, but also did not systematise their thoughts in complex frameworks guided by standardised sets of rules, making it difficult to even classify native African thought as a philosophy in the Western sense[1].

The difficulty in classifying native African systems of thought is in large part due to a basic distinction that is made when defining philosophy itself. On the one hand, philosophy may be characterised as meaning a people/culture's unified world-view, belief system and practice guidelines, according to which pre-colonial communities would classify as having a philosophy. On the other hand, philosophy could be defined in a strict sense as the only the operation of philosophers as deliberate, critical and reflective thinkers, merging into a discipline defined by its ruleset and internal consistency. According to philosophy in a strict Western sense, African native systems of thought would obviously not classify as philosophy, but as mere folklore and culture in its most instinctive and non-reflective sense.

This ambiguous relationship between African philosophers, in the Western sense, and native African systems of thought comes to play a particularly important role within decolonisation efforts after the historical abandoning of the colonies, as African thinkers found themselves on the first line in the effort of trying to piece together and reconstruct an identity for the colonised which could be capable of dealing with the effects of colonisation and globalisation[2].

African philosophers, after the end of colonialism, found themselves tasked with finding the solution to many difficult issues, such as the defining of African philosophy itself as a discipline, the recompiling of post-colonial identities to allow for a degree of restoration of African communities, and the enabling philosophical of interactions with the Western tradition, together with many other concerns raised by that unique historical context. The difficulties presented by such a situation are quite obvious, and have led to the development of many different theories of what should be the purposes and methods of African

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[1] For a good introduction to native African systems of thought and their relation to Western philosophy see: Irele, Abiola, "Introduction" in Hountondji, Paulin J., and American Council of Learned Societies. *African Philosophy Myth and Reality*. 2nd ed., Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 7-30

[2] For an examination of the concept of identity and its relevance for African philosophy see Appiah, Kwame H., "Speaking of Civilisations" in P.H. Coetzee, A.P.J. Roux. *The African Philosophy Reader*. Vol 2nd ed. Routledge; 2003, pp. 435-456.

philosophy, and of how best to define the discipline itself.[3] The debate surrounding the philosophical status of pre-colonial systems of thought is only a part of the tradition, and one could possibly argue that discussions about the status of past system of thought are the least pressing matters within the effort of developing the African philosophical tradition, and of decolonising both Africa and the rest of the world. Nonetheless, I would argue that this very issue stands at the basis of much of African philosophy's struggle for legitimacy, both in the eyes of the west and in the eyes of its own philosophers, because of their role as both creators, innovators and discoverers of a philosophical tradition which does not have the luxury of being able to solely rely on its past tradition to justify its own existence, but which must instead work towards the future without forgetting its own past.

While attempting this creation and structurisation of a post-colonial African philosophy, disagreement between thinkers led to the manifestation of what Henry Odera Oruka defined as four main trends within African philosophy, defined according to the purposes and forms that African philosophy must have and take according to the proponents of each trend. These four trends, as defined by Oruka himself in his article "Four trends in current African philosophy"[4], exemplify four main definitions of what African philosophy is, and of what the roles both of philosophy itself and of African philosophers should be within the African continent and abroad. The four main trends are "ethno-philosophy", "philosophic sagacity", "nationalistic-ideological philosophy" and "professional philosophy" (Oruka 142). These trends in turn relate to what the author describes as two different "senses or usages of the expression 'African philosophy'" (Oruka 141), insofar as African philosophy is conceived of, on the one side of the debate, in a strict sense according to which philosophy is taken as an intellectual discipline characterised by a defined method and the use of logical, critical and reflective inquiry (Oruka 142). Or, on the other side of the debate, it is conceived as a uniquely African discipline, in the sense that it exists in a radically different way to the European sense of philosophy, and is then considered to be an opposing discipline to European philosophy because of its lack of rigorous methods based on logic and rationality. According to the second sense then "To the extent that European philosophy is known to manifest critical and rigorous

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[3] For an overview of some of the debates within African philosophy see Martin, Guy, "Introduction" in *African Political Thought*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
[4] Oruka, Henry O., "Four trends in current African philosophy" in P.H. Coetzee, A.P.J. Roux. *The African Philosophy Reader*. Vol 2nd ed. Routledge; 2003, pp. 141-146.

analysis, and logical explanation and synthesis, African philosophy is considered to be innocent of such characteristics. It is considered to be basically intuitive, mystical, and counter or extra rationalistic" (Oruka 142).

For the purposes of this thesis, I will briefly detail the four trends, but will then only focus in depth on ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy, in particular as far as the debate between proponents of the two trends is regarded. Furthermore, it is worth noting that these trends were never intended to be closed and opposed systems. Instead, they were purposefully created to give distinct examples of larger trends within African philosophy, without ignoring the fact that in reality most philosophers shift across trends throughout their careers and are often somewhere in the middle between two or more trends. As such, we should keep in mind throughout this examination that the trends are used as motivators for my discussion about the philosophical nature of African native systems of thought, as opposed to strict frameworks within which to fit all attempts at defining African philosophy.

The first trend, called ethnophilosophy, refers to a philosophical attitude which relies on examination of the way of life of native Africans, and which attempts to make sense of all the common beliefs and practices of pre-colonial communities as a form of philosophy, which can then be transformed in philosophical terms and examined (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 42).[5] Ethnophilosophy is an example of philosophy in the uniquely African sense, since it is claimed to be distinct from European philosophy both in conception and contribution, in particular as far as the rejection of the concepts of individuality and logic are concerned (Oruka 142). This opposition of Western philosophy as individualistic and based on strict logic, and African philosophy as emotive, community-based and non-logical/instinctive can be recognised in many ethnophilosophical projects, in particular in Léopold Senghor's Négritude, which argued for a distinctively African way of thinking which was based on emotion rather than logic, by claiming that "Emotion is Negro, as reason is Hellenic" ("*L'émotion est nègre, comme la raison héllène*") (Senghor 288).[6] Ethnophilosophy's method is an approach towards native philosophy as a form of cultural philosophy, meaning a philosophy which is formed by the

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[5] Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru, Oswell, "Odera Oruka's Four Trends in African Philosophy and their Implications for Education in Africa." In *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) New Series*, Vol.5 No.2, December 2013, pp.39-55.

[6] Senghor, L.S., 1964, *Liberté I, Négritude et humanisme*, Paris: Seuil. (As cited in Diagne, Souleymane Bachir, "Négritude", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.))

collection of a people's belief, practice and normative systems. The ethnophilosophical tradition has often been received in a negative sense, in particular because of its treatment of unintentional and non-literary world-views as philosophical, which many authors disputed, but also because of its problematic appeals to a common African way of thinking and living, which is at times characterised as atemporal and immutable. Furthermore, by virtue of its attempt to characterise a culture's myths and traditions as philosophical, ethnophilosophy has also been attacked for only engaging with the uncritical aspects of tradition (Oruka 143), as opposed to looking for philosophy in those individuals which question the tradition's foundations and assumptions like is common in the Western-Greek tradition.

The second trend, defined as "philosophic sagacity" (Oruka 143), still focuses on the examination of native systems of thought like ethnophilosophy. However, unlike ethnophilosophy, the proponents of philosophic sagacity focus on the thoughts of individual community members which were known for their wisdom, in particular the community's elders, who were considered to be "repositor(ies) of wisdom, knowledge and rigorous critical thinking" (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 44). The basic claim is that "Africans even without outside influence are not innocent of logical and dialectical critical inquiry" (Oruka 143), and that these individuals, which were known in their community for their intellectual and spiritual prowess, can be considered a native African version of a philosopher because of their critical reflections on the nature of reality and society. The beliefs of these individuals, transcribed with the help of modern philosophers, could then be structured and catalogued into what is claimed to be a true pre-colonial African philosophy. However, the result of this effort would be a philosophical position which is a combination of the beliefs of the native thinker, and of the philosopher who is doing the 'translation' into philosophy. It also remains to be proven that a translation of the thoughts of these wise individuals wouldn't change and corrupt their belief systems to such an extent as to turn them into something else entirely than what their original positions were, in particular when trying to apply logic norms and literary forms to non-literary systems of thought.

In this thesis, I will focus only on ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy, but it is worth noting that philosophic sagacity could help us in finding a capable hybrid approach between modern and pre-colonial African philosophy. Nonetheless, I would argue that the result would fail to move beyond examining native systems of thought as a form of intellectual exploration

and cataloguing of native thought, as opposed to finding a way to utilise native systems of thought in tandem with modern topics and standards to create a philosophy that is characterizable as African both in terms of its location of origin and because of its original points of view and approaches to modern topics. While there is an academic space for a 'cataloguing' of native systems of thought in philosophical terms, I would not agree that it is most urgent in the current effort towards a decolonisation of the discipline and innovation of Western philosophical trends.

The third trend is that defined as "nationalist/ideological philosophy" (Oruka 144), and refers to the philosophical efforts made by the leaders of the newly-independent African countries after the abandonment of the colonies. In particular, nationalist/ideological philosophy is characterised by the search for a uniquely African political identity capable of acting as foundation for a "truly free and independent African society" (Oruka 144) born out of the ruins left by colonialism. As such, "An awareness that they were imitating Europeans compelled these African political thinkers to begin to reflect upon the traditional social order and to search for salvation in pre-colonial experiences in establishing authenticity." (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 47). This awareness consequently led the proponents of nationalist/ideological philosophy to look for the justifying factors of their authenticity within pre-colonial communities, and the social theories which characterised them, specifically communitarianism which was thought by many to have been the "cardinal ethical principle of traditional humanist Africa" (Oruka 144). For example, in the political theories of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, which argued for a notion of *Ujamaa* ('extended family' or 'familyhood')[7]. As well as within Kenneth Kaunda's reasons for Zambian Socialism, which he argued followed from an innate socialist attitude found within the Zambian populations[8].

While deliberately rooted in pre-colonial African thought, these philosophies did not make the same mistake as ethnophilosophy in that they did not presuppose a unified thought common to all members of a community. Rather, they attempted to develop political and philosophical theories capable of being applied in modern societies without losing sight of the cultural aspects which characterised African societies before colonialism. Furthermore, a

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[7] Nyerere, Julius, "Ujamma – The Basis of African Socialism" in Gideon-Cyrus Mutiso, and S.W Rohio, editors, *Readings in African Political Thought.* Heinemann Educational, 1975. Pp. 512-515.

[8] Kaunda, Kenneth D., *Humanism in Zambia and a Guide to Its Implementation*. Zambia Information Services, 1971.

radical difference between European and African ways of thinking was not assumed as given, thus avoiding many of the critiques which attacked the civilised/primitive dichotomy that ethnophilosophy seemed guilty of involuntarily strengthening.

Political/philosophical attempts of the kind described by Oruka can be found throughout the history of African states during the 20th century, and present us with interesting examples of efforts towards a modernisation of native systems of thought, which was seen as the only path capable of ensuring the survival of a truly African identity. Although most of the political attempts towards a uniquely African way of managing a country where ultimately unsuccessful for a multitude of reasons, post-independence African governments can be regarded as the first true attempt towards decolonisation, and as rich source of insights about the practical difficulties of applying philosophical theories in real situations.

The fourth and last trend is "professional philosophy" (Oruka 145), and it is characterised as an approach towards philosophy as a profession led by academically trained individuals who engage in distinctively philosophical activities, for example by writing texts and taking part in academic debates and discussions. Philosophy then is conceived of in a strict sense, as a discipline which "involves critical, reflective and logical inquiry" (Oruka 145), and is thus distinct from philosophy in a broader sense which describes a community's world-view. At first sight it might seem that traditional systems of thought and professional philosophy are in direct opposition, since the presupposition of philosophy in a strict sense involves the rejection of the philosophical status of native systems of thought. However, professional philosophy does not wholly reject systems of thought as useless and incapable of providing philosophical insights, but rather draws a distinction between the unconscious world-views of a community, and the strict rational discipline within which philosophers take part. African Philosophy then becomes the collection of philosophical texts written by African philosophers, defined as African because of their place of physical origin and background. One main criticism which has been raised against the professional philosophy trend is that its use of standards which were developed within the Western-Greek tradition turns it into nothing more than Western philosophy, with very little that is uniquely African about it.

Ethnophilosophy against Professional Philosophy

I would argue that questions of whether or not native systems of thought can be considered to have been philosophies, whether they should only be examined as part of anthropology and history to try and develop insights from them, or whether they are wholly unphilosophical and should be mainly ignored in the attempt to develop African philosophy, stand at the foundation of the debates surrounding the nature of African philosophy. As far as the urgency of this discussion is concerned, it could be argued that the practical and political aspects of decolonisation should take precedence over theoretical discussions about the nature of the discipline itself, but I disagree. I think that the debate surrounding the philosophical status of pre-colonial African systems of thought does not limit itself to the philosophical description of the subjects, but rather also involves a questioning of the philosophical method itself, since a determination of whether native African thought should be examined in philosophical terms, or whether it actually presents us with a different form of philosophy itself, could have deep consequences on the ways in which the act of philosophising itself is conceived of. Hence, I contend that the question about whether or not native systems of thought can be considered philosophical is a question about whether or not philosophy should be limited to a strict conception in which the discourses must maintain a specific form of being individualistic, rationalistic and critical, without deviation from Western standards of thought.

This ongoing debate is exemplified by the discussions among two of the main trends of African philosophy which we detailed earlier, specifically ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy. At its heart, the question of whether or not native myths and cultural beliefs can be called philosophy is a question about the very nature of philosophy itself, and it particularly takes shape in the opposition of philosophy as world-view against philosophy as academic, individualistic endeavour. In the strict sense of the term 'philosophy', the one derived from the Western-Greek tradition, which regards as philosophy the intellectual endeavours of a few educated individuals who reflect and reason about determinate topics in a deliberate and academically articulated manner, native systems of thought should be classified as myth and common sense, rather than philosophy proper. On the other hand, if we were to consider as philosophy a people's world-view, myths, practices, norms of morality and normative justifications, then it would be possible to regard native systems of thought as philosophical in spite of their non-literary and non-deliberately philosophical nature. One possible approach

would be to determine a universal principle upon which strict philosophy is based, and which is also shared by philosophy as world-view of a people, for example by arguing that the focal point of philosophy is a person or a community's attempt to justify their own beliefs in rational terms, thus making the universal foundation of philosophy into "the *reasons* which a thinker gives in defence of the *reasonableness* of his or her thoughts, the *rationale* for their *rationality*" (Onah 4).[9] However, ongoing debates within the discipline itself show us how there is very little agreement across schools of thought and traditions about what a universal foundation of philosophy would look like, and to argue in favour of having found the one true determiner of all philosophical discourse would require a lot more time and space.

Specifically for our current discussion, I will hold proponents of the "professional philosophy" trend as defenders of the first position of strict philosophy in the Western sense, and proponents of ethnophilosophy as defenders of the second position, that of philosophy as world-view. This is a deliberate reduction of many of the arguments proposed by both sides of the debate, but for the sake of the specific scope of this thesis I will have to ignore some of the complexities and varying positions we can find within each trend.

Nonetheless, the examination of these two trends from the point of view of how they argue for and against the philosophical status of native systems of thought can be very useful to our current discussions surrounding the philosophical value of native systems of thought.

In particular, I wish to examine the arguments in defence of ethnophilosophy and its historical origin given by Moya Deacon in her article "The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy in the Discourse of African Philosophy"[10], and then compare them to the well-known attacks against the ethnophilosophical trend made by Paulin J. Hountondji in his famous book *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*[11], within which he details many of the most common downfalls of ethnophilosophy and its application to African philosophy. The purpose of examining these two opposing texts is to highlight the ways in which both trends relate themselves to the philosophical status of native systems of thought, in order to ultimately

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[9] Onah, Godfrey I., "Dialogue between African and Asian Philosophies", guest lecture at Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands. 28 April 2021.
[10] Deacon, Moya "The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy in the Discourse of African Philosophy" in P.H. Coetzee, A.P.J. Roux. *The African Philosophy Reader*. Vol 2nd ed. Routledge; 2003, pp.115-132.
[11] Hountondji, Paulin J., and American Council of Learned Societies. *African Philosophy Myth and Reality*. 2nd ed., Indiana University Press, 1996.

argue that even though they both make good points and raise concerns which need to be addressed, they also both take rather extreme positions in the debate, whereas I would argue that a solution could be found with a more balanced approach.

Moya Deacon and Ethnophilosophy

In defence of the ethnophilosophical trend, Moya Deacon discusses the history of ethnophilosophy and of its oppositions within her article "The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy in the Discourse of African Philosophy". According to her, ethnophilosophy is at its core an attempt to use African philosophy as a way to "reaffirm singularity, uniqueness, identity, and most importantly, a sense of self" (Deacon 115) in opposition to colonialism and its imposition of Western standards and norms on the African continent. The basic assumption of ethnophilosophy then becomes one of identification in opposition to Western philosophy, described as scientific and individualistic in nature, and wholly different from African native systems of thought, characterised as non-scientific and produced by communities as collectives capable of philosophising (Deacon 116). This non-deliberate form of philosophising stands at the centre of many critiques of ethnophilosophy, in particular Hountondji's, and, as we will see later while discussing *African philosophy: Myth and* Reality, gives rise to a question of what form of philosophy should be preferable, one which is characterised by its scientific and individualistic nature, or one which is characterised by the collective and non-deliberate philosophising of a community, a question which Hountondji himself claims to be based upon a confusion "between the popular (ideological) use and the strict (theoretical) use of the word 'philosophy'" (Hountondji 1996, p.47).

The history and origin of the ethnophilosophical trend is itself a point of contention between proponents and critics of it, as it originated in the works of the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels during the colonial era. Father Tempels, author of *Bantu Philosophy* which became considered by many as the founding text of the ethnophilosophical trend, is a controversial figure within the academic discourses surrounding the African tradition, mostly because of the unclear motives behind his missionary mission to convert the natives to Christianity. On one hand of the debate, Father Tempels is regarded by some as having been a perpetrator of the colonialist effort to humanise the native by offering them Western teachings as salvation.

On the other hand, his efforts to defend the natives from the logic of colonialism, and to restore the humanity of native Africans by detailing the depth of their thought and rationality make it so that he is also considered by many others to have been an anti-colonialist thinker whose text helped in the effort of rehabilitating the humanity of natives in the eyes of Europe. The reasons for these opposing interpretations of Father Tempels stem from the fact that he is seen both as a colonialist and a missionary, having argued for example that it is the jobs of missionaries to explain to the natives what their concepts truly are, since they were claimed to have been incapable of formulating philosophy themselves (Deacon 121), but also anti-colonial, in that his recognition of forms of thinking unique to the Bantu people was, at its core, a recognition of the humanity of the natives. (Eze 2010, p.138)[12] All things considered, I agree with the image of Tempels as an anti-colonial thinker, since his project was one of recognition and rehabilitation of the native's humanity against the brutality of colonialism, as opposed to an attempt to develop more efficient strategies for dominating their cultures. His was a "project aimed at constructing a specific African *weltanschauung* (*worldview*) that will rehabilitate the Negro and his culture from the imposed denigrating image of 'primitive mentality'; a new image in parallel with a modernist universal essence." (Eze 2010, p.138)

This opposition between Tempels as colonialist and Tempels as anti-colonialist is reflected in the debate surrounding the validity of ethnophilosophy as a whole:

> As a victim, ethnophilosophy is seen as a contribution to the colonial tyranny and subjugation of Africa, for it is assumed to express the pre-logicality and primitiveness of Africans and their thought. As a response, ethnophilosophy is discerned as an attempt to overcome the degenerate sense in which African societies were regarded during the colonial era, by bringing forward the positive and cultural aspects of communities on the African continent.
>
> (Deacon 127)

Even if we were to completely omit the figure of controversial figure of Tempels for our discussions on ethnophilosophy, there would still remain many points of contention with the varying methods and logics behind the ethnophilosophical trend. In particular, what is often

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[12]Eze, Michael O., *The Politics of History in Contemporary Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010.

attacked is the basic assumption that philosophy can be created in a context which does not attempt to deliberately philosophise or does not utilise writing. This problem of justifying unintentional philosophies does not seem to be solvable by maintaining the Western notion of philosophy itself, as it is based on principles of individual, deliberate, methodical and literary rational reflections. Furthermore, ethnophilosophy attempts the very difficult task of reducing the collective myth and imagination of a community, composed of diverse individuals, into a schematic framework of thought to which all members adhere. If not solved correctly, this issue would force ethnophilosophy to assume as given a common and static essence shared by all members of the group, an assumption which would rightly be contested by most thinkers, since it could become an imposition of a singular scheme of thought upon people who in reality hold varying opinions, thus becoming " the ideology that crushes the individual, and by the same token promotes all forms of fascism and neo-fascism from the most subtle to the most vulgar" (Hountondji 2002: 194). A further difficulty for ethnophilosophy is caused by its assumption that there is a uniquely African way of thinking which is distinct from Western rationality, on which is based in the rejection of logic and individuality (Oruka 142). This opposition of non-Western rationality against Western rationality has had the unfortunate effect of often harming native systems of thought by placing them in a closed system wholly different from Western philosophy, and thus easily placeable in the colonial hierarchy of knowledge which maintains rational Western philosophising at its apex.

I would argue that ethnophilosophy fails to justify the philosophical status of native systems of thought while maintaining a notion of philosophy capable of also justifying the existence of professional philosophy in the Western sense. As I will explain in more detail later while discussing Hountondji's critiques of ethnophilosophy, a solution to the problem lies in a balanced approach which weds together professional philosophy in the Western sense and ethnophilosophy in the collective, non-deliberate philosophising sense of philosophy. This kind of solution could be capable of influencing the Western philosophical method itself, by allowing for true interaction with non-Western traditions.

Nevertheless, the value of ethnophilosophy should not be ignored, as its attempts to highlight the presence philosophical principles within native systems of thought have had the effect of showing us just how much philosophical material there is to be found within pre-colonial

African societies. Proving thus, not only that complex thinking is present within native populations, in opposition to colonialist hierarchies of knowledge, but also that an effort to develop African philosophy would make a grave mistake in ignoring the richness of native thought.

Hountondji and Professional Philosophy

In his now classical text *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Paulin Hountondji details many of what have become the main arguments against the validity of ethnophilosophy as a whole. While these arguments focus specifically on attacking the ethnophilosophical trend, much of the rationale behind them has to do with a denial of the philosophical status of African native systems of thought. To start off, Hountondji rightfully discusses what many consider to be the origin of the ethnophilosophical tradition within Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, and not only critiques Tempels and Bantu philosophy itself, because of its potentially colonial origin, but also calls into question the entire logic of ethnophilosophy, which he claims to have followed directly from the publication and subsequent study of *Bantu Philosophy*, as:

> Indeed, *Bantu Philosophy* did open the gates to a deluge of essays which aimed to reconstruct a particular *Weltanschauung*, a specific world-view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and, moreover, *philosophical*, through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs and institutions – In short, various data – concerning the cultural life of African peoples."

(Hountondji 1996, p.34)

This quote exemplifies many of the concerns raised by Hountondji, in particular his questioning of the very scope of *Bantu Philosophy* and ethnophilosophy, which he claims to be guilty of searching for a common philosophy capable of explaining the world-view of the entirety of the African people. This is clearly a legitimate critique, as it would be impossible to refer to a single philosophical principle capable of explaining the thought of many different cultures and communities. Such an attempt would require us to clearly recognise and delineate an immutable focal essence of African-ness common to all people in all the many

African cultures, something which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to accomplish. However, that is not the same as to say that there are no similarities across neighbouring cultures, especially ones which have shared similar historical developments such as the cultural conglomerate which is the West today. Some authors such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Molefi Kete Asante and Cheikh Anta Diop, do indeed argue that there are common themes within the African tradition which allow us to speak of a specific concept as 'African'. For example, by describing a distinctively African way to conceive of community and personhood.[13] Nonetheless, Hountondji's critique of the search for a common essence across different peoples rings very true, especially when the colonial notions of primitive nature are taken into consideration. The unfortunate fact is that such attempts to reduce the complexities of a culture to a set of unifying principles have been made, and probably still will, and we need to remain vigilant against them.

While discussing the role of ethnophilosophy in the development of African philosophy, Hountondji concludes that: "Until now African philosophy has been little more than an ethnophilosophy, the imaginary search for an immutable, collective philosophy, common to all Africans, although in an unconscious form." (Hountondji 1996, p.38). I agree that such an approach to philosophy should be discouraged, as it would aim to reduce and simplify both African philosophy and native thought to a set of 'simple' principles. However, I disagree with Hountondji's claim that there is no connection between philosophy and native African traditions and practices, because of their being "wholly distinct from philosophy" (Hountondji 1996, p.42) due to pre-colonial Africa's lack of strictly philosophical discourses and texts. He himself came to disagree with this rejection of non-literary traditions in later publications, within which he argued that he "had never ruled out, *a priori*, that philosophical texts could not be found in the oral tradition." (Hountondji 2002, p.220)[14]

While it would be correct to say that native systems of thought do not adhere to a strict notion of philosophy as scientific and literary method of inquiry and discussion, I would like to argue that if we were to follow Hountondji's definition of philosophy, as detailed within *African*

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[13] For an examination of 'African' conceptions of personhood and community, see Eze, Michael O., "Menkiti, Gyekye and beyond: towards a decolonization of African political philosophy" in *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*. Vol. 7. No. 2. May-August 2018.

[14] Hountondji, Paulin J., and John Conteh-Morgan. *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa*. Athens University Press, 2002.

Philosophy: Myth and Reality, we would be left with a discipline which is ultimately incapable of explaining anything outside of its own self-analysis, since to examine the reasons behind common people's assumptions about life, epistemology and morality would require a philosopher to deal with thoughts that are, if not irrational, at the very least unintentional, and most certainly not aimed at philosophical purposes. This is not to say that all instantiations of thought are philosophy no matter the content or context, but rather that to say that philosophy is wholly distinct from a culture's internally shared world-view seems to miss out on much of what philosophy originates from, namely a fusion of a thinker's unique point of view and their context. This distinction between philosophy as literary method and philosophy as world-view is recognised by Hountondji himself and defined as "a confusion between the popular (ideological) use and the strict (theoretical) use of the word 'philosophy'" (Hountondji 1996, p. 47). However, he then proceeds to argue that philosophy in the scientific sense is the only valuable notion of philosophy, and that "we must regard the very idea of an unconscious philosophy as absurd" (Hountondji 1996, p.47). I agree that it would be a mistake to regard philosophy only as the unconscious rationale of a people's common world-view, but to say that there are no unconscious aspects to philosophy is to negate and ignore the relevance that context plays in the development of an individual's philosophy, in the Western methodological senses as well as in the world-view sense of philosophy. The culture that an individual arises out of plays what I maintain to be an undeniable role in the development of an individual's personal thoughts, be it because they conform to cultural norms, oppose them or only analyse them.

Another downfall of ethnophilosophy claimed by him, is that it is addressed at a European public with the purpose of rehabilitating pre-colonial African societies in the eyes of the West, and thus according to Western terms (Hountondji 1996, p.50). However, by focusing on the need to only follow a strict scientific method of philosophy, which was created by the European tradition and only recently imported into African during and after colonialism, Hountondji runs the risk of turning African philosophy into nothing more than a spatially localised branch of Western philosophy. This Westernisation would mean that differences between the two traditions would become dictated only by the spatial origin of the author, and differences in method would disappear and give way only to differences in content. This loss of differing conceptions of the very methods and structures of philosophy itself does not

help projects of decolonisation by putting African philosophy on the same level as Western philosophy, like Hountondji seems to argue. Instead, it would have the effect of hybridising African philosophy into an offshoot of Western philosophy, and of ultimately forcing it to ignore much of its pre-colonial history by relegating all native systems of thought to the realm of anthropology and cultural studies.

Contrary to Hountondji, I would argue that a solution would have to find itself somewhere in the middle between those two more extreme positions, perhaps by utilising strict philosophy in the Western sense to analyse and examine native African systems of thought without ignoring their philosophical value as world-views. Such an approach could then be capable of synthetising the pre-colonial African tradition in modern terms, without ignoring its unique context and content. A lot of work would be necessary to develop such a method, as it would perhaps require a rethinking of the very notions of philosophy which are being held both in the West and in Africa. I am also aware that the very process of examining traditions which are not strictly philosophical according to philosophical terms could itself be an imposition of Western standards by using Western methodologies. However, I would like to argue that a conscious effort to exercise as high a degree of epistemic empathy as possible when dealing with native African systems of thought would allow us to derive new insights capable of breathing fresh air into many discussions which have become stale within the Western tradition. As well as forcing us to question the very methods themselves by placing us in front of a tradition which has developed following a significantly different trajectory from the Western-Greek tradition.

Consequentially, I would argue that an approach which gives African systems of thought the respect they deserve without fetishizing their 'otherness' could be capable of surpassing the colonialist dichotomy by recognising the values of differing traditions without crystallising them as opposites, thus abandoning "the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West—the binarism of Self and Other" (Appiah 124).[15] Hountondji himself recognised that "if we want to be scientific, we cannot apply the same word to two things as different as spontaneous, implicit and collective world-views on the one hand and, on the other, the deliberate, explicit and individual analytic activity which takes that world-view as

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[15] Appiah, Kwame A., "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern", in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds) *The Post-colonial Studies Reader,* Routledge 1996, pp. 119-124.

its object." (Hountondji 1996, p. 63), but ultimately concluded that: since 'strict' philosophy cannot be fully equated with 'world-view' philosophy, then we must abandon the latter and focus only on the former. Whereas I would like to claim that this argument highlights the need for a conception of philosophy capable of reconciling the both of them, as opposed to eliminating one as non-philosophical. In no other tradition is this possibility of a balanced philosophical method as apparent as with African philosophy, in particular with the concept of community as an incredible example of the depth of philosophical insights found within native African systems of thought. Therefore, I would now like to examine the concept of community as found within native African systems of thought, with the purposes of highlighting how useful such a concept could be in the discussing of many of the issues which have characterised modern philosophical and public discourse, such as the role of individuals within communities, eco-environmentalism, veganism and more issues relating to the status of human and its relation with its habitat and community.

The Concept of Community

African communitarianism, as a philosophical theory, offers us much of what I have previously argued to be the preferable methodology when trying to translate native African insights into modern philosophical terms.[16] I would argue that its origins, within the concepts of community held by native African communities, make it into a true example of a philosophical theory which weds together modern topics and standards with native and non-Western insights. The importance of the concept of community itself, within native systems of thought cannot be understated, and it could be argued that it is the perfect example of the presence of commonalities across African cultures[17]. So much so that communitarianism, and the topics which surround it, have become the centre of many of the philosophical debates which characterise the discipline of African philosophy today.

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[16] For examples of forms and themes of African communitarianism see: Masolo, D. A., "Western and African Communitarianism: A Comparison" in Wiredu, K., (editor) *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004. Pp- 483-498.

[17] See: Nyerere, J., "Ujamma – The Basis of African Socialism" (1975). As well as: Kaunda, K., *Humanism in Zambia and a Guide to Its Implementation* (1971).

I am aware of the dangers posed by an attempt to argue for a common concept which is maintained by distinct and varied cultures, especially when one thinks of the terrible consequences caused by the forceful clustering together of different native systems of thought under the colonialist determination of primitive thought. Nonetheless, I maintain that there is a case to be made for a set of concepts which are characteristic of African cultures by virtue of their historical development and their reciprocal contamination. Across the African continent there are practices which, while varying in their particulars, maintain a common approach towards the interactions between the individual person, other persons and objects, and their environment. Ancestor worship is such a recurring practice which has been often equated to a religion, even though there are significant differences in practice across varying African cultures.

When we speak of African communitarianism, what we are referring to is a philosophical theory which examines the relations between the community and the individuals which compose it. The determiner 'African' is justified by the presence in African societies of a conception of community which is characterised by the inclusion of more than just the living persons themselves within it, and by discussions surrounding the precedence of the community over the individual or vice versa. Personhood, in African thought, is closely related to the community, and its formation stands at the basis of rich philosophical discussions about the nature of being a person within a community. Within African thought, "the term 'person' must be understood differently from the enlightenment codification of a person as essentially rational, where 'rationalism' remains a sole criterion for subjectivity" (Eze 2008, p.107)[18], meaning that it does not follow the Western conception of 'person' as a rational, independent individual. Rather, African conceptions of personhood rely heavily on the idea that subjectivity is in part formed in relation with other people within a social context, and that personhood is to be understood as "located in a community where being a person is to be in a dialogical relationship in this community" (Eze 2008, p.107). The nature of this dialogical relationship is debated within the philosophical community. In very few words, the three main positions within the discussion about whether the community or the individual is prior are: the "procedural argument" in favour of the priority of the community over the individual (Eze

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[18] Eze, Michael O., "What is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a regulative ideal", in *South African Journal of Philosophy.* Volume 27, Issue 4, 2008. Pp. 106-119.

2018, p.2); the "noumenal position" in favour of personhood as being automatically acquired at birth within the social context of a community, without being ontologically dependent on the community itself (Eze 2018, p.3); and lastly the argument for "contemporaneous formation", given by Eze, according to which "the individual and the community are not radically opposed in the sense of priority" (2008, p.106).

Independently of which of the three arguments one sides with, there is an undeniable role of importance given to the community as the locus within which subjectivity is exercised; a role which is missing from mainstream Western discussions about the relation between an individual and the society they live in. Furthermore, the boundaries of the African concept of community do not follow the same scope as the Western conception of community, which only includes living human beings. Instead, traditional African communities are composed of "the living (*umuntu*), that is, those who are present. As well as the living-dead (*abaphansi*), that is, those who have passed but are still present in the memory of the community as ancestors. It includes the unborn, or otherwise, the yet-to-be born future generations, and the nonliving, that is, objects and inanimate things" (Eze 2017, p.621)[19].

This unique inclusiveness of the African concept of community, together with its sense of the community not being subordinated or opposed to the interests of the individual, are what make, in my opinion, the African concept so relevant for modern discussions. For example, about the relationships between individuals and the environment, as well as between individuals and their communities, and between members of a community and non-members. Approaching topics such as environmentalism, veganism and moral responsibility towards non-Western countries with a different conception of community which does not place individual interests in opposition to the common good, could prove very helpful in finding solutions which are not limited by calculations of materialistic benefit and loss. Furthermore, if we were to apply an inclusive conception of community to debates surrounding our obligations towards nature, the move away from the Western ideal of "anthropocentrism" and nature as resource (Eze 2017, p.622) would be inevitable, to the great benefit of the environment itself and of all those people who are experiencing the true effects of the Wester societies' irresponsibility towards to the climate. Such a significant

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[19] Eze, Michael O., "*Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism)*: An African Environmental Theory", in A. Afolayan and T. Falola (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan 2017. Pp. 621-632.

change, in the very ways in which we conceive of our own subjectivities and their relations to our environment, would obviously require a shift in conceptual frameworks, something which would arguably be impossible to direct towards a specific concept of community.

Even so, the examination of a different way of thinking of our place in the world would benefit current discussions greatly, and I would argue that the relevance of a uniquely African way of approaching a concept, within the context of an international and Western-dominated discourse, shows us that there is a need within modern philosophical discourses for a breath of fresh air. One which could be give by the examination in philosophical terms of native systems of thought, which up until now have too often been relegated to the realm of anthropology and mere cultural voyeurism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this thesis has been to argue in favour of a philosophical approach which does not ignore nor denaturalise native systems of thought which do not follow a strictly Western notion of philosophy. To do so, I have examined some of the ways in which the philosophical status of native systems of thought has been discussed within the African philosophical tradition, and have argued that the positions held by ethnophilosophy and Paulin Hountondji are too extreme, since they fail to both support the philosophical value of native systems of thought, and maintain a notion of philosophy capable of also justifying philosophy in the Western sense, which remains the global standard. As an example of a balanced philosophical approach, I have examined the philosophical theory of African communitarianism, which I claim to be capable of brining true innovation to Western philosophical discourses by presenting us with a theory which is philosophical in nature, but native in origin. The implications of this thesis could be a renewed interest in the translation of non-Western systems of thought into philosophical terms, which could in turn bring to the forefront insights and theories which have so far been ignored.

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