

**THE INTELLECTUAL STRUGGLE TO MAKE  
AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY ORIGINAL AND SPECIFIC  
FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
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Lucius Outlaw observes, in his article “African 'philosophy': Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges,” that “a forceful debate has been raging among intellectuals in Africa and Europe...” The debate focuses on questions ranging from “Is there (such a thing as) an African Philosophy?” ‘Did (or do) traditional Africans have a philosophy?’ ‘Can there be (such a thing as) an African philosophy?’ to ‘What is African philosophy?’<sup>1</sup> While I acknowledge his point that these questions “initiate and frame legitimate intellectual inquiry and discourse,” I consider his claims that these questions also “convey the putrid stench of a wretchedness that fertilizes the soil from which they grow”<sup>2</sup> as too damning. I would rather see these questions as an intellectual struggle to redefine and reposition African philosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Generally, it is very difficult to give a definition of philosophy that is both formal and satisfactory because a definition might turn out to be either the conception of an individual or the definer's own culture. While I take this concern to heart, I acknowledge that the reading of philosophical texts impresses on me the thinking that philosophy can be defined as a critical and reflective thinking on the problems and

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<sup>1</sup>Lucius Outlaw, “African 'philosophy': Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges,” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137-156 at 137.

<sup>2</sup>See *Ibid.*

meaning of human experience such that a process of critical evaluation is applied to whatever ideas, methods and analysis and interpretation that emerge. In this sense, philosophy is characterised by its universal and necessary principles; however “there are modalities and traditions that can be distinguished by their being ‘African’.”<sup>3</sup> Thus I appreciate the contemporary African venture to set out distinctive African modalities or traditions in the complex enterprise of philosophy. What I have set out to do in this article is to characterise, based on my appraisal, the intellectual challenges and critical responses of African scholars and thinkers on the arguments of making African philosophy original and specific.

### Discerning a Method

Since its post-colonial development, the existence of a unique African kind of thinking has been questioned. African philosophers have been preoccupied with a search for African identity and thought. Occasionally, it has come as no surprise to some scholars that the emergence of African kind of philosophy was viewed as a reaction to a debased view of Africans.<sup>4</sup> Thus far, the debate about African philosophy has expressed great diversity. The thinking is becoming methodical according to Moya Deacon<sup>5</sup> who refers to H.O. Oruka's original classification consisting of four diverging, yet related, trends, namely: ethnophilosophy, sage philosophy, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy. Deacon's point in this classification is that these trends should be considered as responses to the question of the nature of African philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>J.M. Van Hook, “African Philosophy: Its Quest for Identity,” *Quest* 7, no. 1 (1993): 28-43 at 30.

<sup>5</sup>See Moya Deacon, “The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy in the Discourse of African Philosophy,” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 97-111 at 97.

<sup>6</sup>See *Ibid.*, 98.

There is also the impression that African philosophy, when considered in the ethnophilosophical sense, is non-scientific.<sup>7</sup> This could be due to the denotation of African philosophy in the folk philosophy of a people – a view that Oruka interprets in terms of customs, traditions and religions of a specific people. To this extent, the assumption, according to D.N. Kaphagawani, is that the traditional wisdom and institutions of various African people hold a metaphysical and ideological system which is different from the individual, rational and critical elements displayed in European philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

There is a sense in Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* that a lot of professional philosophers in Africa do not accept this fundamental assumption of ethnophilosophy. In fact, Hountondji's critical comments suggest that the general notion of philosophy by professional philosophers in Africa is that of a discipline that is rational, critical, rigorous, logical and reflective in its investigation. Thus philosophical thinking might be different in methodology because of cultural differences, historical antecedents and environmental factors, but not in its essential character, analysis and interpretation. This means Oruka's classification of the trends in African philosophy seem to have been adopted uncritically by most philosophers in Africa.

Another problem that could be discerned in Oruka's classification is the apparent lack of dynamism in African philosophy. This may not have been intended in his classification of the four trends of African philosophy. Indeed, this is only a

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<sup>7</sup>H.O. Oruka, “African Philosophy: A Brief Personal History and the Current Debate,” in *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, ed. H.O. Oruka (Nairobi: African Centre for Technology Studies, 1991), 15-32 at 20-21.

<sup>8</sup>See D.N. Kaphagawani, “Bantu Nomenclature: and African Philosophy,” in *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, ed. H.O. Oruka (Nairobi: African Centre for Technology Studies, 1991), 179-196 at 182.

contribution by Oruka to the ongoing debate about the nature of African philosophy after the colonial era. What should be noted by academics in Africa should be the contexts of African philosophy, the influences on African philosophy and the challenges to the nature of African philosophical thinking. So what Oruka has contributed is a platform for more discussion. There should be no hasty effort to treat with levity and contempt his initiative to set a significant tone to the debate about the general nature of African philosophy. The question still unanswered is: what really is the nature of African philosophy?

### **The Issue of Meaning and Existence**

Most times, African philosophy still appears as a social and cultural enterprise, especially when viewed in the context of African experience. No doubt, it is an offshoot of the reflection of the historical circumstances on the African continent. For this reason, it has remained a potent sign of philosophical thinking by the African people, even though it is not done according to the western pattern of organising and interpreting experience. After all, whatever philosophical discourse that is celebrated in Europe and America is a product of basic methods of interpreting and evaluating historical circumstances.<sup>9</sup> It is important to press further this point because European and American examination of all phases of human experience presupposes their historical development. However, their analyses and criticisms of fundamental methods, procedures and theoretical enterprises of the meaning of human experience pose as standard methodologies for any valid philosophical thinking, even with 'given prejudice' for sound thinking.<sup>10</sup> What I would welcome as

<sup>9</sup> Cf K.A. Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992), 137.

<sup>10</sup> Cf B.J. Van der Walt, *The Liberating Message: A Christian Worldview for Africa* (Potchefstroom: Institute of Reformational Studies, 1994), 13.

true synthesis of African thinking with intellectual methods and procedures of thinking from other continents would be a situation in which Africans can generate concepts to express the organisation and interpretation of experiences in Africa.

The organisation and interpretation of historical circumstances that seemed to have started to generate serious discussion about African philosophy is Placide Tempels' *Bantu philosophy*.<sup>11</sup> Tempels' thinking is that *Bantu philosophy* is his attempt to reveal the system of thinking that could be considered the foundation of African existence in its traditional and indigenous entity, in the hope that an accurate understanding of the African would be established.<sup>12</sup> Tempels really sought to know the beliefs of the Bantu Africans he was working with, and how they interpreted the nature of visible and invisible realities rationally.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding the many interpretations and controversies, I consider *Bantu philosophy* as the beginning of acknowledging relevant cultural principles, significant ideas and a unique form of thinking in African culture.

What was fundamental about the context in which *Bantu philosophy* was written was that Tempels "identified the evolutionary development that is said to take place in all societies."<sup>14</sup> Tempels related this evolutionary development to the Bantu people by identifying that "...all the customs...depend upon a single principle, knowledge of the Inmost Nature of beings, that is to say, upon their Ontological Principle."<sup>15</sup> Thus, essentially, *Bantu philosophy* was an attempt to have a basic comprehension of the system of thought that was the bedrock of the traditional indigenous African existence. It was a philosophy Tempels wanted to

<sup>11</sup> See Deacon, "The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy," 104.

<sup>12</sup> Cf P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. C. King (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), 21.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Deacon, "The Status of Father Tempels and Ethnophilosophy," 104.

<sup>15</sup> Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 35.

disclose as a philosophy that governed the African beliefs and their rational analysis and interpretation of visible and invisible realities.<sup>16</sup>

Tempels' contribution is appreciated in African philosophical community generally. He is regarded as the hero, the westerner who came out to insist on the notion of Africans having a philosophy. The implicit connection between Tempels and the concept of ethnophilosophy was problematic because of the critique of the ideas of ethnophilosophy and Tempels. One of the critiques was that *Bantu philosophy* is not addressed to Africans but to Europeans, and particularly to two categories of Europeans: colonialists and missionaries.<sup>17</sup> The real issue Hountondji brings out in his critique of *Bantu Philosophy* is that "Africans are, as usual, excluded from the discussion, and Bantu philosophy (sic) is a mere pretext for learned disquisitions among Europeans." Furthermore, he adds that "the black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor"; because "he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject of a possible discourse."<sup>18</sup> This and other critiques spurred African thinkers to begin a serious discourse on African philosophy.

### The Aspiration for a Truly Theoretical Discourse

Returning to Hountondji's astounding critique of *Bantu Philosophy*, it could be deduced that Hountondji seemed very interested and keen to see that there emerges a specific and explicit African philosophy, which in my thinking, would be referring to an African philosophy born out of the 'native consciousness' of the African mind. For Hountondji, *Bantu Philosophy* is a publication that seemed to have been meant for those who colonised the African continent, that is, a work to inform the colonisers about the civilisation of the African people. Thus, the African is an interesting

<sup>16</sup>Cf*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>P. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 34.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

subject of a far away land, not the subject matter that is very relevant to the African people. This may sound as a harsh critique of Tempels by Hountondji. However, on a second thought, one can say that Tempels undoubtedly involved the BaLuba people, anonymously and/or implicitly in the writing of *Bantu Philosophy*.<sup>19</sup> My view corroborates the thinking of Peter Bodunrin who states that "the African philosopher cannot deliberately ignore the study of the traditional belief system of his people." Continuing, Bodunrin believes "philosophical problems arise out of real life situations."<sup>20</sup> I consider Bodunrin's view a challenge for African philosophy to develop out of a context that is truly African.

For philosophy to be authentically African, the African life and consciousness must be the seed bed of imaginative thinking and intellectual writing. This calls for reflection on the part of African thinkers – a reflection that would cast out the shadow of inferiority in the minds of African intellectuals before their European counterparts. On this note, the question of identity matters, but this question cannot be addressed, according to F. Abiola Irele, without the "the force of lived experience." Irele writes that "the force of lived experience lent urgency to the thought-provoking question of existence."<sup>21</sup> This view lends credence to Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* whose objective, Irele says, was to "reveal the existence of a reflective disposition among the Ba Luba, an ethnic group in the then Belgian Congo."<sup>22</sup> For Irele, "*Bantu philosophy* provided the model and conceptual framework for the construction of an original African philosophy and has remained a central reference of philosophical debate in Africa."<sup>23</sup> This did not end the aspiration for a truly

<sup>19</sup>See Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 32-33.

<sup>20</sup>P. Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy," in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, ed. T. Serequeberhan (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1991), 63-86 at 77.

<sup>21</sup>F. Abiola Irele, "Francophone African Philosophy," in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup>ed., eds. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112-119 at 113.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

theoretical discourse. In fact, it generated more challenges for African thinkers.

### African Philosophy: Identifying the Challenges

Dwelling on a collective system of thought that is discernible in a people's culture did not measure up as a criterion of philosophy. In fact, Hountondji was in no doubt that, for philosophical activity in Africa to be reckoned as philosophy in our modern culture, it must identify with the reflective development in science.<sup>24</sup> In my judgment, this is certainly right because, without a scientific culture, whatever conclusions arrived at in African philosophy would not satisfy the necessary conditions for any philosophical enterprise. In a nutshell, the critical role of philosophy, in the twenty-first century, has to include, according to Hountondji, "the analysis of the collective experience with a view toward a critique of everyday life."<sup>25</sup> In order to achieve this, two things must be borne in mind by African thinkers: (1) philosophy in Africa should reappraise itself based on the introspective and intellectual character of a modern scientific culture; (2) philosophical practice in Africa must underscore African intellectual adventure that is capable of ensuring the modernisation of African life. At this juncture, I would like to refer to OderaOruka's view in the hope that it could facilitate the sustained reflection on the nature and scope of philosophy in Africa in the sense in which it can be both a discipline and a cultural practice.

### Oruka's View: Four 'Currents' of African Philosophy

Oruka observes that a deeper analysis of various proposals and findings meant to demonstrate the meaning of African philosophical thought (that is, as a response to the question: what is

<sup>24</sup>Hontondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 52.

<sup>25</sup>Paulin Hontondji, "Daily Life in Black Africa: Elements for A Critique," in *The Surreptitious Speech*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), page range at 359.

African philosophy?) has yielded "generally two radically distinct senses or usages of the expression 'African philosophy'.<sup>26</sup>

The first sense suggests that African philosophy is a "body of thoughts and beliefs" unique to the African way of thinking. In this sense, "African philosophy is explained or defined in opposition to philosophy in other continents but in particular to Western or European philosophy."<sup>27</sup> Oruka thinks it is assumed that there is 'a conceptual framework' that is African and characteristically unlike the 'European reasoning' which Senghor describes as "analytical, discursive by utilisation."<sup>28</sup> Thus, African philosophy is basically intuitive, mystical and counter- or extra-rationalistic while European philosophy manifest logical explanation and synthesis.

The second sense is about philosophy in general as a "universal activity or discipline." Oruka holds that philosophy is "independent of racial or regional boundaries and specialities" because philosophy is presented as a discipline that transcends cultural trappings to assume a conceptual framework that "employs the method of critical, reflective, and logical inquiry."<sup>29</sup> To this end, African philosophy should not be an exception. In fact, Oruka adds that "the talk of a uniquely African conceptual framework or way of thinking (African mentality) with respect, at least, to the discipline of philosophy is not entertained."<sup>30</sup> This poses a big challenge to whatever enterprise is understood as philosophy. In other words, a true African philosophy, according to Oruka, must measure up by employing an analytic, reflective and rationative methodology. In this sense then, all talk of authentic philosophical speculation that is

<sup>26</sup>H. OderaOruka, "Four Trends in Current African Philosophy," in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup>ed., eds. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 120-124 at 120.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>See, Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism*, trans. M. Cook (New York: Praeger, 1964), 74.

<sup>29</sup>Oruka, "Four Trends in Current African Philosophy," 120.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

to be considered African philosophy should ensure that it eschews all “cultural and racial baggage” to become “a corpus of thoughts arising from the discussion and appropriation of authentic philosophical ideas by Africans or in the African context.”<sup>31</sup> This second sense, in the expression of African philosophy, actually creates an equal platform for all human beings with the potential for philosophical activity.

While these two broad senses of African philosophy make sense, Oruka draws out four significant trends in current discussions on African philosophy. They are Ethnophilosophy, Philosophic sagacity, Nationalist-Ideological philosophy and Professional philosophy. The reason I am venturing into Oruka's itemisation of significant trends in current African philosophy is to examine his arguments.

On **ethnophilosophy**, Oruka explains that the logic and individuality which constitute Greek (European) philosophy seems to be replaced with emotion and communality. The idea in ethnophilosophy, as he puts it, is that, with the need to bring up what constitutes examples of African philosophy, traditional or African customs, poems, taboos, religions, songs, dances, etc, surfaced as elements to identify with African philosophy. In so doing, African philosophy became identified with a 'community philosophy' or 'folk philosophy.' In this sense, one can talk about 'Yoruba philosophy,' 'Annang philosophy,' 'Fulani philosophy,' etc. Deducing from the development of philosophy, as it is understood since it emerged as a way of life and discipline, the critical part of a tradition is always what is acknowledged as philosophy. Ethnophilosophy then has a shortcoming as the somewhat uncritical part of the African tradition. It may certainly be relevant in some sense in philosophical inquiry in Africa, but in my view, I strongly believe that “Thoughts or works of the individual man (sic) and women of intellect (sages, philosophers, poets, prophets, scientists, etc) constitute the critical

part of a tradition or culture while beliefs and activities of the type found in religions, legends, folk tales, myths, customs, superstitions, etc constitute the uncritical part.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, it would make sense to conclude that 'philosophy proper is always found in the critical, not uncritical, aspects of a people's tradition.'

Oruka's argument in **philosophic sagacity** concerns a logical and dialectical inquiry in the critical and reflective thought of various African sages. What seems quite sound in his argument, and would really be true in an encounter with an African sage, is the manifestation of the power of reason and insightfulness in the thoughts and judgments of many men and women who, without the benefit of modern education, are reckoned to be critical and rigorous thinkers. Most times, such African men and women would not be long-winded, but they would leave no one in doubt as regards “making clear rationally where they accept or reject the established or communal judgement”<sup>33</sup> on whatever problem. However, there are notable objections pointed out by Oruka. These objections are: (1) “that sagacity, even if it involves an insight and reasoning of the type found in philosophy, is not itself a philosophy in the proper sense” and (2) “that recourse to sagacity is a fall back on ethno-philosophy.”<sup>34</sup> By analysis, these objections posit the difficulties of circumventing the standard sense of philosophy that is critical and scientific. Thus, African philosophy is cornered in all fronts to measure up to self-critical style of scientific methodology. Be that as it may, philosophic sagacity has the 'conventional quality of wisdom' which sages manifest in the midst of their compatriots. Also, various sages manifest what Oruka describes as a 'dialectical and critical attribute of free philosophic thinking' as individual thinkers rather than as a 'folk philosophy.'

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 121. I think Oruka meant 'thoughts or works of individual men'.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

Based on Oruka's point of view, the nationalist-ideological basis of African philosophy is championed mostly by politicians and statesmen such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere. Thus the contributors to this perspective of African philosophical literature believe strongly that "the exact nature and existence of African philosophy would remain obscure unless we (Africans) seek for it on the basis of a clear social theory for independence and the creation of a genuine humanist social order."<sup>35</sup> This tone of argument seems to carry the ideology of post-colonial independence such as the revival of an authentic African thinking that is rooted in a 'truly free and independent African society'. Furthermore, the argument for a sound social society assumes that 'communalism' is the required social theory. "In communalism, the individual and society are said to have egalitarian mutual obligations," that is, "no individual would prosper at the expense of the society and the society would not ignore the stagnation of any of its members."<sup>36</sup> One would wish that this trend of philosophy is rooted in African philosophical heritage; but it is not. According to Oruka, this is clearly the philosophy of the individual African authors. In fact, Oruka says that some of the works in this trend of African philosophical literature is not, in the strict sense, really philosophical, but different from ethno-philosophy in several important respects.<sup>37</sup> Oruka did not give the reason for this view. However, I would think it is not unconnected with the beauty of the bond of community life in African culture. Lastly, Oruka writes that the contributions to this trend of African philosophy in modern world is practical and has in view national and individual freedom as explicit problems to solve.

The last trend in African philosophy, by Oruka's reckoning, seeks to streamline what really should be considered African philosophy. Oruka holds that "this trend consists of works and

debates of the professionally trained students and teachers of philosophy in Africa."<sup>38</sup> The major premise here is that philosophy should still be upheld as a discipline or activity whose meaning is not defined by genetic or racial constitution, but by critical, reflective and logical inquiry.<sup>39</sup> Oruka adds that, though, there are differences between African philosophy and other philosophies due to cultural dissimilarities, these should not constitute 'radical, but significant' difference. He maintains that cultural dissimilarities can, (and I add, that it does) bring about differences of philosophical issues and the methodology adopted to discuss problem(s), the nature and meaning of philosophy remains. Thus, a written work produced by an African in any branch of philosophical thought will qualify as African philosophy.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the written work has to be epistemology, metaphysics/ontology, logic, or ethics before it would, according to this trend of African philosophy by Oruka, be considered African philosophy. In this sense sadly, philosophy is compartmentalised. It has been divided into branches, though contemporary philosophy can throw up a lot of perspectives on current realities: for example, social constructivism, existential phenomenology, etc.

One criticism against this trend in African philosophy is that most of the individuals in this category employ western or 'European' thought pattern and principles to discuss African philosophy. For this reason, Oruka writes that professional philosophy in Africa is treated as western or 'European' and not African. He remarks that those who make such comments forget that whatever western framework used by African philosophers does not make "any principle of learning a monopoly of the person who made the formulation or the culture within which it was made."<sup>41</sup> Thus, if a

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>See *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 124, endnote 8.

framework has a universal appeal, then it is a framework that can be validly used by another human to interpret cultural realities peculiar to another culture. Oruka adds that "it is a historical law of intellectual development that intellectual offerings in a given culture are appropriated and cultivated in other cultures." He explains that "the Greeks borrowed and transformed the ideas of ancient Egypt." Also, "Northern Europe and America have done the same to the offerings of Greece. Therefore, seriously speaking, modern developments in philosophy and logic, and in other fields of learning, are not an exclusive preserve of Europe or any other culture in which the developments have occurred."<sup>42</sup> From this explanation, I believe any framework of learning can be validly applied in whatever cultural context. However, I also strongly believe African intellectuals should be very keen about a 'framework' borne of African reasoning or philosophical thinking. To give greater and critical discussion to Oruka's articulations (or 'currents') of various arguments on African philosophy, I would like to provide what Outlaw describes as more insightful discussions of philosophical 'trends' in Africa by A.J. Smet and O. Nkombe.<sup>43</sup>

### More Insightful and Nuanced Classifications

The first trend is termed ideological and it includes the works and figures Oruka groups in his nationalist-ideological current. However, it goes further to include persons Oruka might have grouped in the professional current. For Outlaw, this trend also includes other 'currents', 'traditions,' or 'schools' of discourse such as 'African personality'; Pan-Africanism; Negritude; African humanism; African socialism; scientific socialism; Consciencism; and

'authenticity'. Outlaw adds that the rule for inclusion is that all the works are directed basically to 'redressing' political and cultural situations of African peoples under the conditions of European imperialism and colonisation.

The second trend includes works which recognise the existence of philosophy in traditional Africa. This group examines philosophical elements in traditional Africa and the various ways they are manifested. The aim here is to systematically elaborate these philosophical elements as 'repositories' of wisdom and esoteric knowledge. For Outlaw, what qualifies theories included in this category are the shared motivation to contest the pernicious myth that Africans are peoples of a decidedly 'primitive mentality'.

The third trend, as Outlaw states it, concerns the critical school as determined by the reactions of participants to the theses and projects of the ideological trend and the school that recognises the existence of traditional philosophies. Outlaw writes that "it is from this critical school that we get the label 'ethno-philosophy' being applied to the other two as a way of questioning their relevance and especially, their validity as instances of philosophy proper."<sup>44</sup> Another side to this classification, as Outlaw puts it, are those who likewise critique western conceptions of science and philosophy.

The last trend is regarded as the 'synthetic current'. In this group are works and practices of persons who are involved, among other things, in the use of philosophical hermeneutics in the explorations of issues and in the examination of new problems, some of which emerge in the African context.

V.Y. Mudimbe's critical discussion supplements Smet and Nkombe's interpretation. Mudimbe identifies two groups within the whole project of the meaning and interpretation of African philosophy. His first group comprises works that make use of

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<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

The authors of the following four philosophical 'trends' in Africa are Smet and Nkombe. However, my discussion of them here is from Outlaw, "African 'philosophy': Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges," 146.

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<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.

philosophy in a 'wide sense' of the term. It includes the ethnophilosophical and ideologico-philosophical senses. The first sense are "works arising from the need to express and to render faithfully the unity and the coherence of traditional philosophies...," while the second sense include "works qualified by an explicit intention to separate and to analyse present constraints of African society, marking the present and future situation, while remaining true to African ideals."<sup>45</sup> The second group<sup>46</sup> are those who employ the use of the term 'philosophy' in the strict sense. This group would have the following classes of persons whose works:

- (a) reflect on the conditions of the possibility of African philosophy (they include: Eboussi-Boulaga, Towa, and Hountondji);
- (b) reflect on the significance of western science (they include Adotevi, Ngoma, Mudimbe);
- (c) would like philosophy to be regarded 'as a critical auxiliary to the process of development' (they include Atanganga, Njoh-Mouelle, Eboussi-Boulaga). Mudimbe considers this third class as the best state reached in African philosophical thinking.
- (d) express the hope and concern for philosophical hermeneutics (they include Nkombe, Tshiamalenga, Leleye, Kinyogo). From the discussion above, there is a palpable intellectual enthusiasm to spell out the originality in African philosophy.

### Tone for African 'Philosophy' to be Original and Specific

Hountondji strikes a confident tone when he writes that there are a set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by the authors themselves. He explains that the concern is "solely with the

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<sup>45</sup>V.Y. Mudimbe, "African Philosophy as Ideological Practice: The Case of French-Speaking Africa," *African Studies Review*, 26, nos 3/4 (1983): 133-154 at 146.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

philosophical intention of the authors, not with the degree of its effective realization, which cannot easily be assessed."<sup>47</sup> Hountondji acknowledges the existence of a body of literature as African philosophy, even though he cautions that African philosophy

does not lie where we have long been seeking it...but that our philosophy consists essentially in the process of analysis itself, in that very discourse through which we have been doggedly attempting to define ourselves—a discourse, therefore, which we must recognise as ideological and which it is now up to us to liberate, in the most *political* sense of the word, in order to equip ourselves with a truly theoretical discourse which will be indissolubly philosophical and scientific.<sup>48</sup>

African authors whose works in African philosophy are extremely instructive have already given so much. However we can still appeal to them to do better by fanning into flame their quest for originality in order to distinguish themselves in their works. Sometimes this recognition, as Hountondji notes, is usually long in coming, thus "the desire of the subject... grows increasingly hollow until it is completely alienated in a restless craving for the slightest gesture, the most cursory glance from the other."<sup>492</sup> Well, it is possible that incisive thinking by African thinkers might become stale when there is no recognition; by no means should this stunt their spirited effort to establish a conceptual framework for a genuine theoretical discourse on African 'philosophy' that is both original and specific. At this juncture, the most serious difficulty concerns a clear direction for a philosophical practice with African philosophical creativity. Accordingly, I resound a personal remark of Hountondji's commitment to African philosophy when he notes that all he wants to do,

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<sup>47</sup>P. Hountondji, "An Alienated Literature," in *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2003), 125-136 at 125.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

is to clear the ground for a philosophical practice worthy of the name, based on rigorous scientific practice, and at the same time to provide a new reading of existing African philosophical literature and, by ridding it of its ethnophilosophical illusions, to show that this theoretical practice has actually already begun and needs only liberate itself and to recognise its autonomy and its possible functions in a new Africa.<sup>50</sup>

So the task ahead for African thinkers and intellectuals, including African students and lecturers involved in philosophical studies, is a challenging one, though noble and profound in character. Whatever African scholars set out to do to demonstrate more interest in African philosophical thinking, Hountondji's apt remark is worth our attention. He writes that "all people think conceptually, under all skies, in all civilizations, even if their discourse incorporates mythological sequences (like that of Parmenides, Plato, Confucius, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kagame, etc.) and even if it rests *wholly* (as is nearly always the case) on fragile ideological foundations, from which, of course, it must be liberated by critical vigilance."<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

Part of the critical vigilance required is for African thinkers and intellectuals, including African students and lecturers involved in philosophical studies, to subject the existential realities, experiences and languages in Africa to consistency and rigour. This would require the rigour of scientific process within Africa, a process that would be rooted in a mature concept of freedom which would avoid an African philosophy which account for only 'conceptual features' of difference from western philosophy. On the contrary, African philosophy should stem from "rational" accounts of the world of lived

experience...and 'rational' articulation of principles for guiding social existence."<sup>52</sup> Such a rational account should not be focused on traditional African set up. Rather, it should be on contemporary African thought in the context of contemporary African research. Thus answers to twenty-first century Africa would come about when philosophy in Africa would have a profound influence on the minds of the peoples who would determine how issues are resolved on the continent.

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 135, endnote 9.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 136, endnote 15.

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Outlaw, "African 'philosophy': Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges," 144.