

Paulin Hountondji on Western Epistemic Dominance and the Problem of Scientific Dependence in Africa

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Abstract:

The question of Western epistemic dominance continues to dominate discourses on African philosophy. During the Great Debate in African philosophy, the position of Ethno-philosophers was more or less to project an African epistemic narrative against the prevailing Western epistemic discourse at the time. On the other hand, critiques of Ethno-philosophers (otherwise known as the Universalists of which Hountondji was a chief proponent) were also of the view that, Ethno-philosophers were playing the rhythm of Eurocentrism. The Universalists were also accused of criticizing without producing credible alternative. In either divide of the argument, the central focus has been on the challenge of Western epistemic dominance. Western epistemic dominance could be said to have created scientific dependence in Africa. Many decades after the Great Debate, one still asks: To what extent has the problem of Western epistemic dominance been addressed by Africans? Is there any relationship between Western epistemic dominance and African scientific dependence on the west? Is African scientific dependence internally created by Africans or externally manipulated? Has Hountondji's concern on African scientific dependence been addressed? Paulin Hountondji has been a consistent voice in addressing this problem. The focus of this paper is to consider these challenges anew and to see how far the problem has been addressed. Using the hermeneutic method, the paper argued that the problem of western epistemic dominance can only be addressed through the creation of credible and competitive alternative scientific knowledge by Africans.

Keywords: Paulin Hountondji, Epistemic Dominance, Scientific Dependence, Eurocentrism, Africa

Introduction

Paulin Hountondji's scholarly prowess emerged in an era when most African countries have gained their independence from colonialism, and were struggling on how to assert African presence in the global space. A lot is associated with this historical era. First is the idea that colonialism came against the background that Africans are primitive and since they were presumed to be primitive, the colonial masters came on a presupposed enlightenment mission. Colonialism by this, became a justified instrument to enlighten Africans. More so, the earliest European scholars cum anthropologists who visited African societies provided narratives that undermined and subordinated African culture and mindset, describing Africans as primitive¹. Scholars like Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Edward Taylor, and James Frazer were of the view that Africans are irrational and pre-logical. This primitive description of Africans did not go down well with some African scholars who devoted time to proving that Africans are not primitive as alleged by the Western world. Alexis Kagame argued on the foundation of African philosophy, J. S. Mbiti came up with his theory of African concept of time, Cheikh Anta Diop discussed Afrocentric Historiography, Ogotemmel presented African cosmology, likewise other Africa scholars of their time.

These reactionary responses by some African scholars took the dimension of trying to explore every available avenue to prove that there is African philosophy. These scholars were tagged Ethno-philosophers and were accused (basically by the Universalists) of playing the rhythm of the West, which is the polarization of philosophy; making a distinction between African philosophy and Western philosophy². The position of this Ethno-philosophers on the existence of African philosophy, the Universalists observe leads to particularism. The implication of the

¹, Modestus N Onyeaghalaji. "Theorizing Afrosensitivity in Eurocentric and Afrocentric Narratives for Sustainable Development in Africa" *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 17. no.4, (2015): 87

position of Ethno-philosophers as alleged by these Universalists, is that they were trying to allude a particular type of philosophy to Africa and another type to the Western world. This also could be said to align with Western perception of Africans as primitive.

It is against this background that Hountondji and his fellow Universalists (Kwasi Wiredu, Odera Oruka, and Peter Bodunrin) emerged. Their point of convergence is the position that philosophy is not culture dependent, rather, it is a systematic and methodological inquiry that cannot be altered by geographical location or application³. The Universalists were of the view that philosophy is universal irrespective of where it is emerging from. This position is not also free from philosophical pitfalls. Their (Universalists) disposition entails that 'African philosophy' must conform to the same method as Western philosophy for it to gain the status of philosophy. Robert Bernasconi, deducing from this Universalists position, posits what he calls 'double bind'. For him (Bernasconi) “either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt”⁴.

Paulin Hountondji is mostly celebrated for his position as a Universalist, but beyond his Universalist disposition, one of his major areas of concern has been on the issue of scientific dependence in Africa. It is important for us to note that the issue of scientific dependence in Africa at some point became a major issue of concern for Hountondji. From late 80s to early 90s, most of Hountondji's works and conference papers were basically focused on addressing the problem of 'scientific dependence

2. Samuel Imbo. *An Introduction to African Philosophy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1998), 17-18

3. Imbo. *An Introduction to African Philosophy*, 17-18

4. Robert Bernasconi. “African Philosophy's Challenge to Continental Philosophy” in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* Eze, Emmanuel C (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 183-196

in Africa'. Hountondji puts it thus: “Those familiar with my most recent articles and conference papers will recognize that the title of this paper defines what has been one of my main concerns during the last five years”⁵. The focus of this paper is to reappraise what has been a major issue of concern to one of the founding fathers of African philosophy. Hence, the paper shall address the following questions: to what extent has the problem of Western epistemic dominance been addressed by Africans? Is there any relationship between Western epistemic dominance and African scientific dependence on the west? Is African scientific dependence internally created by Africans or externally manipulated by Europeans? And finally, has Hountodji's concern on African scientific dependence been addressed after many decades? We shall explore the idea of Western epistemic dominance to see if there is any connection between African scientific dependence and Western epistemic dominance. We shall also explore the problem of African scientific dependence. Finally, we shall address Hountondji on Western epistemic dominance and African scientific dependence. This will help us ascertain the extent to which this problem has been addressed in Africa.

The Idea of Western Epistemic Dominance

The idea of Western epistemic dominance will be approached in this paper from the perspective of what Chimakonam calls 'global epistemic injustice'⁶. Global epistemic injustice points to the problem of the exclusion of other epistemic traditions (especially African) in global epistemic debate. This exclusion questions the objectivity of the term 'global' since it is only a particular regional epistemic perspective that is discussed as global. The idea of global epistemic debate ought to be an all-inclusive debate that puts into consideration the epistemic narrative of every culture. For Graness, global justice debate within Western philosophy gives

5. Paulin Hountondji, “Scientific Dependence in Africa Today” *Research in African Literature* 21, no. 3. (1990): 5

6. J.O. Chimakonam, “African Philosophy and Global Epistemic Injustice” *Journal of Global Ethics* 13, no.2 (2017)

the impression that the global justice debate centers on four ideologies: Cosmopolitanism, Communitarianism, Particularism and Nationalism which are all established in the Western philosophical circle. In her (Graness) view, this marginalizes other philosophical traditions like that of Africa⁷.

The concern raised in this work has to do with the appendage of the term 'global' in what actually could be seen as regional epistemic discourse. Hence, the idea of Western epistemic dominance has to do with how Western epistemic tradition has dominated every epistemic discourse and is erroneously seen as being global instead of regional. In the light of this prevailing circumstance, Chimakonam states; “When we take a handful of epistemological theories, what do we observe? We observe that they are Western narratives representing the Western philosophical perspective. One is bound to ask: what about the African, the Chinese or the Indian perspective?”⁸. The question of Western epistemic dominance is explainable within the context of geopolitics⁹. Ezeogu expanded Fukuyama's idea on 'the struggle for recognition' which is innate in man and also responsible for political ideological changes. For Fukuyama, this desire or struggle for recognition is completely satisfied within liberal democracy. For Ezeogu, the problem associated with this desire for recognition has not been addressed at the geopolitical level. Ezeogu corroborates Fukuyama's view as he maintains that this same desire for recognition is also responsible for Western epistemic dominance. In his analysis, just as there is this desire in individuals, so also does this desire exist within countries. It is part of human nature to seek for recognition from its kind. Going by this, the Western epistemic dominance is triggered by the desire for recognition.

7. Anke Graness. “Is the Debate on 'Global Justice' a Global one? Some Considerations in View Modern Philosophy in Africa” *Journal of Global Ethics* 11, no. 1. (2015): 127

8. Chimakonam, “African Philosophy and Global Epistemic Injustice”, 124

9. Uchenna Ezeogu A. “Fourth Industrial Revolution and Geopolitics of Knowledge Production: The Question of Africa's Place in the Global Space” *Filosofia Theoretica Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 10, no.3 (2021): 45-55

The focus here is not solely to discuss the idea of Western epistemic dominance, rather to see how it has influenced African scientific dependence. It is our desire to create a nexus between Western epistemic dominance and African scientific dependence. This will open us to the geopolitics behind African scientific dependence. Just as we have earlier asked; is there any relationship between Western epistemic dominance and African scientific dependence? Western epistemic dominance is the external instrument of the West to ensure continued African epistemic dependence (scientific dependence). Hountondji observed this many decades ago and had argued on the need for a change in narrative. To what extent has this problem been addressed?

The Problem of African Scientific Dependence

On the problem of African scientific dependence, the most recent event that triggered our curiosity has to do with the recent view of South African president Cyril Ramaphosa's at 'Dakar International Forum on Peace and Security in Africa 2021'. He painted a clear picture of the cause of scientific dependence in Africa. For Ramaphosa, there is a structured unjust relationship between Africa and the people of the Global North. This unjust relationship is evident in so many ways. In the area of access to finance, he argues that world financial institutions do not treat the people of the Global North and the people of the Global South (especially Africa) as equals. While countries from the Global North borrow at lower interest rate, countries from the Global South (especially Africa) borrow at a very high interest rate¹⁰. One can deduce that this uneven approach to borrowing gives undue advantage to a particular set of people against others. He also argues on the need for multilateral approach in international relations, instead of unilateral approach which is peculiar to the Global North. In his view, this multilateral approach should be based on mutual respect and countries of the world must be mutually respectful to one

10. Cyril Ramaphosa Dakar International Forum on Peace and Security in Africa. 2021. The argument of Ramaphosa at the conference is that there is a conspiracy from the Global North to keep Africa where they are and also to make it look as if it is the fault of Africa.

another. In driving home his point, Ramaphosa cited the issue of access to vaccine against Covid 19. The Global North, for him, arrogantly believes that they know what is good for Africans, and that all Africans need do is to accept the finished vaccines that are produced in Europe and America. For him, such relationship is not mutually respectful, rather he posits the need for them to relax the intellectual property right of such vaccine production as many African countries have the capacity to produce the vaccine¹¹. Beyond the position of Ramaphosa, Europe and America have assumed this position that Africa cannot survive without them and that it is their responsibility to direct and guide Africa.

On the intellectual aspect, Chimakonam and Nweke, have argued on why the politics against African philosophy should be discontinued. Their position affirms our claim that there is a deliberate effort from the people of the Global North to ensure that Africa is continually subjected under the control of the Global North. Chimakonam and Nweke were focused specifically on philosophy as an academic field of study, they argue thus; “everyone currently teaching academic philosophy in Africa received their training either in a Western or Western – orientated institution. These institutions from their inception were designed to employ a philosophy curriculum that presents philosophy as purely a Western heritage”¹². It is our position to extrapolate their view to include all known academic fields of study. The marginalization is not peculiar to only philosophy as a field of study, rather, it permeates every field of study, whether in the sciences or arts. This could be seen in the use of words like orthodox and unorthodox medicine. Medical practices emanating from the West are seen as orthodox (i.e. conventional, standard), while those ones emanating from Africa are unorthodox (i.e. unconventional, heretical). By this structured segregation which approves everything West and discriminates against everything Africa, progress within the field of African studies and sciences is

11. Ramaphosa 2021.

12. J.O. Chimakonam and V. Nweke “Why the 'Politics' against African Philosophy Should Be Discontinued” *Dialogue* 57, no 2. (2018): 281

inhibited. During my (Ezeogu) Post Graduate Programme at Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Prof. Ike Odimegwu told us a story about an uncle who had lived for many years in the United States of America. This his uncle had suffered from ulcer for many years in America and they had only succeeded in managing the problem over there. On his arrival to Nigeria, after exhausting the drugs he came with, the pain started again, he complained about the problem to the hearing of an old man in their village. The old man went into the bush and gathered herbs for him, and after taking the herbs for few days he was totally cured of his ulcer. Yet, this type of medical practice is classified as unorthodox.

Covid 19 challenge is another good example, the way World Health Organisation treats solutions coming from Africa, creates the impression that they are actually waiting for the solution from a particular global place (the Western world). It suffices to say that the refutation of Madagascar's claim without any form of clinical trial substantiates this claim, despite the obvious fact that Covid 19 has been more lethal in Europe and America when compared to Africa¹³. This highlights our question; 'is there any relationship between Western epistemic dominance and African scientific dependence?' To this question, our answer is in affirmative. Western epistemic dominance is an instrument created to ensure continued African scientific dependence. This also provides answer to our other questions; is African scientific dependence internally created by Africans or externally oriented? To this, we will like to state that African scientific dependence is externally created but can be addressed internally. The influence of Western epistemic dominance is the external factor, while Africans acceptance of such status quo can be corrected internally. This will launch us to our main focus, has Hountondji's concern on African scientific dependence been addressed after many decades? On this note we shall consider Hountondji's concern and possibly analyze the extent to which this concern has been addressed.

13. Felix Tih, "Madagascar Slams WHO for not endorsing its herbal cure" May 11th 2020 Retrieved August 10th, 2021. N. P.

Hountondji on Western Epistemic Dominance and African Scientific Dependence

We shall consider some of Hountondji's works where he addressed the challenge of Western epistemic dominance and African scientific dependence. Our focus shall be on four of his papers where he addressed the problem of African scientific dependence. The works are as follows: “On the Universality of Science and Technology” (1987), “Scientific Dependence in Africa Today” (1990), “Knowledge Appropriation in Post-colonial Context” (2002), and “Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies (2009). The focal point in these papers is that Hountondji argues on the challenges faced by indigenous African knowledge system as a result of its encounter with Western science. For him, there is need to understand both the traditional (African) and modern (Western) system of knowledge and make use of both for our survival. He argues that instead of having a synthesis of both systems, which will culminate in a relationship of mutual enrichment, unfortunately what we witness is a situation where indigenous knowledge is marginalized¹⁴. In addressing the relationship between African indigenous knowledge system and modern science, he pointed out that, traditional knowledge system 'ought' to go side by side with modern science (Western science), rather, what is observed is a relationship of 'mute juxtaposition' and 'mutual ignorance', exclusive of all dialogue and exchange. This process of marginalization leads to stifling into oblivion the whole sectors of indigenous knowledge¹⁵. The point here is that at the on-set of the encounter between indigenous knowledge system and Western modern science, there has been a deliberate effort on the part of Western modern science to frustrate and/or eliminate indigenous knowledge. In our view, this is the origin of African scientific dependence.

¹⁴. Paulin Hountondji, “Knowledge Appropriation in Post-colonial Context” in *Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation* Catherine A Odora Hoppers (ed.) (South Africa: New Africa Book (Pty) Ltd, 2002), 24

For Hountondji, at the earlier stage of this encounter and coexistence (encounter between traditional knowledge system and modern science), medical doctors operating in the best equipped hospitals, top-level experts in surgery or pediatrics would tell their patients to go back to the village and consult traditional healers¹⁶. Again, even respected and sometimes renowned physicists and chemists do not hesitate to consult local rainmakers to ensure that their guests will not be drenched during any of their public events. It is important for us to add that this practice still exist today. There have been situations where people with certain medical conditions are moved from well-equipped hospitals to the place of local medicine men for healing. It is common among the people of the South Eastern Nigeria, Bokki area of Cross River State to consult local medicine men for healing especially in bone related health problem.

On the system of modern science bequeathed to Africans, Hountondji saw a deliberate gap created in order to force Africa into scientific dependence. In his view, there are three important stages in science; the first stage is data collection, the second stage is the interpretation of raw data and the final stage is the application of findings to practical issues¹⁷. Hountondji argues that Africans were given the first and last stages and were forced to depend on Europe and America for the middle stage. For Hountondji, the most important stage is the middle stage, but this middle or medium stage is deliberately programmed by the colonizers to only take place in colonial metropolis. Hountondji, in his exact words, puts it thus:

In the process of scientific investigation, as understood in our times, the decisive stage is neither the collection of data which, in a way, initiates the whole process, nor the application of

15. Hountondji, “Knowledge Appropriation in Post-colonial Context”, 24

16. Hountondji, “Knowledge Appropriation in Post-colonial Context”, 23

17. Paulin Hountondji “On the Universality of Science and Technology” in B. Lutz (ed.) *Technik und Sozialer Wandel Verhandlungen des 23. Deutschen Soziologentages in Hamburg* (1986), 384

theoretical findings to practical issues, which is the final stage, but the most important is the middle term, that is, the interpretation of raw information¹⁸.

For him, this intermediate stage is missing in the whole process of scientific activity in the colonies. While on the one hand, there is serious efforts to eliminate indigenous knowledge system, on the other hand there is incomplete transfer of modern science (Western science) to Africans. He drew a hypothesis to prove that it was a deliberate omission. For him, scientific research and economic activities tow the same line of the three stages. Just as laboratories are for experimentations, so are industrial plants needed for industrial productions, both of them are the middle stages for scientific research and economic activities respectively and they are missing in Africa¹⁹. This middle stage for him, is the only stage where human creativity is fully expressed. Currently in Africa, one may argue that this problem has been addressed to some extent, that we now have laboratories and industries in Africa. Despite these developments in Africa having more universities, libraries, laboratories and industries, Hountondji still believes that scientific research remains basically extraverted, alienated and dependent in Africa. To substantiate this position, he argues that the simplest technical facilities in our laboratories are made abroad, and Africans are yet to master the first link of the chain, the production of means of production. He also pointed out that these facilities still lag both in quantity and quality. More so, he further argues that scientists in Africa often fall into the temptation of addressing issues that are of interest to the Western audience, on the basis that, if he/she does not, he/she may have no scientific audience at all. On this note, it suffices to say that the objectives and programmes which African scientists tend to achieved may have little or nothing to do with real African challenges.

18. Paulin Hountondji, "Knowledge Appropriation in Post-colonial Context" in *Indigenous*

19. *Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation* Catherine A Odora Hoppers (ed.) (South Africa: New Africa Book (Pty) ltd, 2002), 24

In one of his most recent publications on this problem, “Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two perspectives on African Studies” Hountondji posits thus;

Instead, I am afraid the way we do research in Africa is just the opposite. Too often do we investigate subjects which are of interest first and foremost to a Western audience. Most of our articles are published in journals located outside Africa, the fact is that African scholarly journals themselves are read much more outside Africa than in Africa. In this sense, our scientific activity is extraverted, i.e. externally oriented, intended to meet theoretical needs of our Western counterparts and answer the question they pose. The exclusive use of European language as a means of scientific expression reinforces this alienation²⁰.

Despite all one may refer to as progress made by Africans in the area of scientific research, for Hountondji, there is still a very long way behind what should be perceived as Africa's final goal. This final goal, in his view, is an autonomous, self-reliant process of knowledge production and capitalization that will enable Africans answer their questions and meet both intellectual and material needs of the African societies.

Conclusion

The problem of continued Western epistemic dominance and Africa's scientific dependence is externally created but can only be properly addressed internally by Africans. It is not exclusively a matter of negligence on the part of Africans. There is a deliberate geopolitical structure created with the sole aim of keeping Europe continually above Africa. The challenge is that many decades after this problem was

20. Hountondji, Paulin “Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies” *RCCS Annual Review* 1, September (2009): 8

observed by Hountondji, African scholars have not done enough to challenge the status quo in order to change the narrative, rather, they have continued to play the ostrich. Most times, even arguments for a narrative change are addressed to Western audience. We argue that, it will be wishful thinking for Africans to expect a narrative change from the West, when we consider that the desire to dominate is innate in human beings. So long as the system stands in the favor of the West, it will be difficult for them to argue for a narrative change. If Africans cannot stop Western scientific domination, at least let them not promote it.

Africa can borrow a leaf from Asians, both Africa and Asia were colonized by the Western world, they bequeathed the same system of Western epistemic dominance on both, they were together tagged Third World countries because of their level of underdevelopment. In 1955, there was an Afro-Asian conference known as 'Bandung Conference' held in Indonesia to discuss issues of peace, economic development and decolonization in both continents. Today, much of Asia has broken both scientific and industrial domination imposed on them by the people of the Global North. China today is a strong global competitor and is seen by America as a direct rival, while Africa has not made any significant improvement. Even Asians (especially China) seem to be on the mission to recolonize Africa. The noticeable economic presence of China in Africa has become subject of suspicion. It is our position, that domination is part of geopolitics and the only way Africa can liberate itself from Western epistemic dominance and impending Chinese domination is through original creative output that responds to Africa's needs. Hountondji had echoed this earlier, it is imperative on us to re-echo it in this 21st century, as negligence of this clarion call will spell doom for Africa, considering the fact that it is no longer a question of just Europe and America, China has become part of the big picture.

Finally, we are faced with the dilemma of how to reconcile Paulin Hountondji's view as a Universalist and his argument on scientific dependence in Africa. As a

Universalist, he agreed that one method, which is Western method should be used as the philosophical method by arguing that philosophy is not culture bound. From our perspective, it is obvious that one will definitely run into contradiction in trying to reconcile Hountondji's view as a Universalist and his position against Western scientific domination. His position as a Universalist tend to promote Western epistemic dominance.

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