



## Ethnophilosophy

Ethnophilosophy was developed in Africa in the 1960s though its origin can be traced back to a book by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels on Bantu philosophy. In this book, published in 1946, Tempels tried to finish with the view that primitive peoples have neither ontology nor logic, are unable to recognize the nature of beings or even of reality as such. Tempels was looking for an ontology colored by “local” cultural components but also by language and seriously attempted to build a philosophical system of Bantu-thought. What followed were endless controversies about the nature of African philosophy that made of “ethnophilosophy” a stream of thought much richer than its name might let suppose. A part of its stimulating power can be traced to the ambiguity of Tempels’ approach itself: on the one hand, it could be easily dismissed as paternalism or the attempt to force African philosophy into the straightjacket of European concepts; on the other hand, the expressed desire to give “ethnic” philosophy a new role within the international hierarchy of the philosophies has been immensely attractive. Be that as it may, Tempels’ book became the real manifest of “ethnophilosophy.”

Another point at issue that spurred internal ethnophilosophical discussions was the question if African philosophy is advanced by an entire people (that is, by a collective) or by individual philosophers. This question (which does not occur in Tempels’ book) has first been taken up by the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji who claimed that ethnophilosophy is no philosophy at all because it remains indifferent towards individually-critical, that is, typically *philosophical* approaches. Related debates touch upon fundamental questions concerning the meaning of “collective thinking” or the nature of philosophy as such.

However subtle the points that emerge from these discussions may be, for the outside observer ethnophilosophy appears to be a kind of anthropology (whose premises it continues to share) with an incorporated interest in metaphysical questions. Its opposite is “conventional”

Western philosophy, which persistently explores truth with the help of a single, individual *mind*, aiming at the crystallization of a truth relevant for everybody. What matters for ethnophilosophy is the truth brought forward by a certain way of life of a group of people that can be found at the “inside” of a culture and that can exist independently of any considerations of those things that exist at the outside. Ethnophilosophy is radical in the sense that it not only aims to reestablish, through its opposition to the all-intruding “international” philosophy, its own philosophy within the borders of a certain *nation*. Going much further than many of today’s opponents of globalization would dare to go, ethnophilosophy thinks of philosophy as taking place within the borders of a certain ethnic group.

In spite of the intensive critical evaluation and transformation that ethnophilosophy underwent in Africa since the 1960s, it has almost never captured the attention of people outside the small academic world dealing with “African philosophy.” However, through recent confrontations with the theme of “globalization,” the idea of “ethnophilosophy” seems to expand its field of influence. In 1997, Fidelis Okafor published an article in *Philosophy East & West* with the slightly curious title “In Defense of Afro-Japanese Ethnophilosophy.” Okafor reevaluates qualities like “folkness,” and “communal mind” as characteristics of a philosophy that takes a people’s *Weltanschauung* as simultaneously a point of departure and an objective. He puts forward “the reasoning or thinking that underlie the existential outlook, the patterns of life, belief system, aesthetic and moral values, customary laws and practices of a particular people” as primary constituents of philosophy. While Paulin Hountondji, who dominated the discourse on this subject for such a long time, employed the term “ethnophilosophy” negatively, Okafor insists on its positive connotations. “Folkness” becomes for Okafor a subject of interest for “non-Western” philosophies which are “devoid of universal ideas of Western philosophy” (p. 366). Okafor quotes Graham Parkes who claimed that the” feature of [the Japanese] tradition that makes it quite different from its Western counterparts is that philosophy did not develop as a separate discipline in isolation from life, but was rather embodied in particular forms of practice.” Here Okafor sees parallels with African philosophy. A “communal element” dependent on people’s own experience, an admitted innocence towards the typically Western distinction between realism and idealism (p. 368), and an emphasis on “immediate experience” would all be “non-Western” characteristics shared both by Africans and by Japanese.

Ethnophilosophy contains a rich “inner” cultural experience, but would be mistaken if it thinks that it can grasp itself *from the inside*, that is, by developing its methods out of its own traditions. It will always remain impossible to grasp one’s own inner philosophico-cultural experience from the unique standpoint of that experience itself. In order to grasp itself *philosophically*, ethnophilosophy has to leave the “inside”-sphere of the “ethno” and become, like any full-fledged philosophy, “universal.”

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**Literature:**

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