Ethnophilosophy as Decolonization: Revisiting the Question of African Philosophy
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Abstract

Ethnophilosophy is widely regarded as a disreputable orientation in African philosophy. For example, critics of ethnophilosophy think of it as a "defective philosophy," a "semi-anthropological paraphrase," a merely "implicit philosophy," a "crazed language," and so on. Although these negative portrayals were made in the 80s and 90s (roughly, 1981-1997), and some of these critics softened their position with time, they persist in the thoughts of some contemporary African philosophers, in the rather inarticulate unease about ethnophilosophy in many quarters today, witnessed in the characteristic disposition of some African philosophers to distance themselves from the works of Placide Tempels, John S. Mbiti, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Alexis Kagame, and in the talk of a post-ethnophilosophy among some contemporary African philosophers rooted in the belief about the inadequacy of ethnophilosophy. Call those who today still think of ethnophilosophy in this fashion the *ethnophilosophy holdouts*. The aim of this paper is to give reasons to think that the position of the ethnophilosophy holdouts is not tenable. More positively, I defend a thesis that makes a claim about the positive status of ethnophilosophy as a philosophical orientation.

Keywords: Ethnophilosophy. Decolonization. African Philosophy. Epistemic Decolonization.

1.   Introduction

Ethnophilosophy is widely regarded as a disreputable orientation in African philosophy. This image is linked to the vociferous repudiation of ethnophilosophy by the critics of the orientation. For example, the critics think of ethnophilosophy as a "crazed language" (Hountondji, 1996), a "defective philosophy" (Bodunrin, 1981), a "philosophy in a debased sense" (Oruka, 1990), "a semi-anthropological paraphrase" (Wiredu, 1991), and so on. Although these negative portrayals of ethnophilosophy were made in the 80s and 90s (roughly, 1981-1997), and some of these critics softened their position with time,[1] they persist in the thoughts of some contemporary African philosophers (e.g., Matolino, 2011; Ojimba, 2022; Taiwo, 2010), in the rather inarticulate unease about ethnophilosophy in many quarters today witnessed in the characteristic disposition of some African philosophers to distance themselves from the works of Placide Tempels, John S. Mbiti, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Alexis Kagame, and in the call for a post-ethnophilosophy among some contemporary African philosophers rooted in the belief about the inadequacy of ethnophilosophy (Mungwini, 2014; Ojimba, 2022; Osha, 2011; Ude, 2024). Call those who today still think of ethnophilosophy in this fashion the *ethnophilosophy holdouts*.

The aim of this paper is to give reasons to think that the position of the ethnophilosophy holdouts is not tenable.[2] More positively, I defend the following thesis,

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[1] In support of this claim, see Ochieng (2002) on the evolution of the thought of Odera Oruka, and see also Hountondji's preface in the second edition of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. See also Hountondji's later reflections (Hountondji, 1997, 2002). That said, the extent of this shift, for example, in Hountondji, is still a matter of open debate (see Osha, 2011).

[2] I am certainly not a lone voice here. Happily enough, a number of African philosophers have been rising to the defense of ethnophilosophy in recent years. These include Mangena (2014), Agada (2013, 2022), Ogbonnaya (2022), Janz (2022), and Etieyibo (2022). Among these proponents, some are moderate optimists, and some are flat-out optimists. Moderate optimists include Janz (2022), Agada (2013, 2022), and Ogbonnaya (2022). For example, while distancing himself from what he calls "the racial baggage of early promoters of ethnophilosophy," Agada (2022) forcefully argues that ethnophilosophy is a wellspring of concepts rooted in African tradition that has globalizing credentials. And in another paper, Agada (2013) claims that "[w]hile it is true that ethno-philosophy marked a watershed in the history of African philosophy, it cannot advance African philosophy beyond the foundation level which it actually is" (p. 43). Janz (2022) and Ogbonnaya (2022) argue along similar lines to Agada (2022) in that they claim ethnophilosophy to be a valuable source of raw materials or foundation or well-spring for doing African philosophy. The flat-out optimists include Mangena (2014), and Etieyibo (2022). Mangena (2014) tackles some objections against ethnophilosophy from Paulin Hountondji and Kwame Appiah, contending that ethnophilosophy is very much like Western philosophy and that religious beliefs are complimentary to scientific thought and practices. In the same vein, Etieyibo (2022) contends that ethnophilosophy instantiates a genuine philosophy to the extent that

which makes a claim about the positive status of ethnophilosophy as a philosophical orientation:

The Bona Fide Thesis about Ethnophilosophy: Ethnophilosophy is an authentic, distinctive, and well-developed African orientation in philosophy.

To be sure, ethnophilosophy holdouts might find this thesis provocative, if not outrageous. But it is a plausible thesis. And I defend it as follows. First, I argue that the ethnophilosophical problem raised by the self-styled "professional philosophers" in African philosophy, and accepted, tacitly or explicitly, by the ethnophilosophy holdouts rests on a profound misconception: the characterization of ethnophilosophy they attack does not exist in the great works of Tempels, Mbiti, Senghor, and Kagame. Second, I argue that ethnophilosophy constitutes a form of decolonization, which among other things, invites us to question those very assumptions about the nature of philosophy, and rational belief from which the ethnophilosophical problem seems to greatly arise. I develop this second argument by drawing on a framework of decolonization that flowers in Mitova (2020, 2023).

That is the primary aim of this paper. A secondary aim is to establish, through a reading of ethnophilosophy, the relevance of African philosophy in the struggle against global epistemic distributive injustice, that is, the injustice that pertains to the global imbalance in the distribution of epistemic goods, such as, knowledge, credibility, esteem, and trustworthiness. One implication of this is that unbeknown to some critics, and ethnophilosophy holdouts, ethnophilosophy properly understood, is a strong ally in the realization of the intellectual ambition they set for African philosophy, and the continent.

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it involves reflection on human experience, a core feature of philosophy, and secondly, it latches onto evolved ethical values, principles and rules of society. This paper belongs to this second camp. And it earns its keep in this camp and in the debate more generally by attempting a more comprehensive reconstruction of the ethnophilosophical problem that stimulates the works of the critics of ethnophilosophy and the works of the friends of and the optimists about ethnophilosophy; in the positive image it champions for ethnophilosophy (as a form of decolonization); and in the credentials it advocates for the orientation, such as, as showcasing the relevance of African philosophy in the struggle against global epistemic distributive injustice. Another way in which the present approach is different from those in the literature, and thus, earns its keep, is through the method adopted. As opposed to countering the objections of the critics of ethnophilosophy *a priori*, this paper seeks to vet those objections through a close reading of the works of the pioneering ethnophilosophical thinkers.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section (2), I present the ethnophilosophical problem, that is, the set of objections standardly raised against ethnophilosophy. In section (3), I present the first argument for the bona fide thesis. The argument relies on using detailed textual analyses to show that the ethnophilosophical problem rests on a profound mischaracterization of ethnophilosophy. The use of detailed textual analyses in this section is informed by the conviction that the best way to ascertain the veracity of any philosophical claim made about any philosopher, or the veracity of the presuppositions made by an African orientation in philosophy is not to let ourselves be guided merely by what philosophers say about these issues, or for that matter by what the conventional beliefs are about them in the African philosophical community, but by what the philosophers themselves actually did achieve, or claim in their own philosophical texts. In section (4), I take up the second argument for the bona fide thesis by showing that ethnophilosophy constitutes epistemological decolonization. Taking the decolonial perspective towards ethnophilosophy allows us to see that the ethnophilosophical orientation amounts to a bold invitation by its practitioners to question the very assumptions that lend credence to the critics' objections in the first place. I end the paper with some remarks that pull the strings of the discussions together.

2. The Ethnophilosophical Problem

Without a shadow of doubt, the unflattering image of ethnophilosophy today was shaped by the vociferous attacks on the orientation of those within the field who describe themselves as "professional philosophers," such as, Peter Bodunrin, Kwasi Wiredu, Odera Oruka, and Paulin Hountondji. And this negative image persists today not just through those works in which those views were expressed, but through the thoughts of contemporary African philosophers who continue to hold those views, including African philosophers like Matolino (2011), Ojimba (2022), Osha (2011), and Ude (2024), to mention but a few.

Let us start with their conception of ethnophilosophy on which their criticisms are based. According to Bodunrin, who considers himself the "A. J. Ayer" of the group of professional

African philosophers (an apparent reference to the role A. J. Ayer played as a spokesperson for the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle for whom logic and the empirical method of observation were considered paramount in philosophy), ethnophilosophers "present the collective worldviews of African peoples, their myths and folklores and folk-wisdom as philosophy" (Bodunrin, 1981, p. 161). For Hountondji (1996), who coined the term "ethnophilosophy" and intended it as a pejorative term, ethnophilosophy is an ethnographic work masquerading as philosophy. The "ethno" in the "philosophy" betokens for him its abnormality as a philosophical genre since philosophy is intrinsically an individual affair. Similarly, for Oruka, ethnophilosophy is "a specialized and wholly customs-dictated philosophy"(Oruka, 1983, p. 383). This same conception is shared by Bodunrin (1981), and Wiredu (1991). Wiredu puts it this way: "According to this view, the duty of a contemporary African philosopher, as far as African philosophy is concerned, is to collect, interpret, and disseminate African proverbs, folktales, myths, and other traditional material of a philosophical tendency" (Wiredu, 1991, p. 90). Moreover, all four philosophers attribute the orientation to the works of Tempels, Senghor, Mbiti, and Kagame. Contemporary critics and ethnophilosophy holdouts such as Matolino (2011), Osha (2011), Ojimba (2022), and Ude (2024) think of ethnophilosophy along those lines as well. For example, Ojimba (2022) references Hountondji's notion of ethnophilosophy when describing the orientation. He writes as follows: "Hountondji later used it [ethnophilosophy] to describe the works of sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and philosophers who present collective worldviews of African peoples, their myths and folklores, wisdom, etc. as philosophy" (p.106). Similarly, Ude (2024) claims that "[t]he ethnophilosophy 'genre' is hardly different from the works of ethnographers/ethnologists, as it merely presents native worldviews and cultural forms somewhat taken to be immutable 'metaphysical essences'" (p.72).

Now to the specifics. According to the critics, ethnophilosophy is defective because of the following deficiencies:

2.1. The Audience Problem: The claim here is that ethnophilosophy names a certain kind of literature produced for Europeans and intended to serve European's interests, especially the colonial and the civilizing missions. Hountondji (1996) presses this objection against Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, which he dismissed as mere ethnographic work with philosophical pretensions (Hountondji, 1996, p.34), and one that is focussed on the European public. The evidence he cites for this is the seventh and last chapter of Tempels' work: "Bantu philosophy and our mission to civilize." Similarly, Ojimba (2022) argues that "in their anxiety to debunk the idea that Africans are incapable of philosophising, they [ethnophilosophers] direct their works at a European audience rather than an African audience" (Ojimba, 2022, pp. 106-107; Osha, 2011).

2.2. The Primitive Unanimity Problem: This is perhaps the most common attack. The claim is that ethnophilosophy presupposes a hidden philosophy, a body of settled beliefs to which an African group (say the Bantus) "unconsciously and collectively" adhere to with the implication that in traditional African society everyone agrees with everyone else" (Hountondji, 1996, pp. 37, 38 & 60). Wiredu claims that this problem arises from the tendency of ethnophilosophers to generalize their claims to group-levels, say about Africans in general, or Bantus in general (Wiredu, 1991, p. 89). And Osha (2011) see in this feature of ethnophilosophy, the "relentless and systematic de-agentialization of subject, peoples, and agents" (p.41).

2.3. The Settled Consensus Problem: The claim here is that we are unable to reach settled consensus on the questions being investigated by ethnophilosophers because of the problem of their oral sources: proverbs, folklores, folktales, myths, collective wisdom, and the likes. Hountondji argues that this is why philosophy requires a body of existing literature as a precondition because this offers philosophical debate a useful anchor point for settling disagreements. He puts it this way:

> Unfortunately, in the case of African 'philosophy' there are no sources; or at least, if they
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> exist, they are not philosophical *texts* or *discourses*. Kagamé's 'institutionalized records', or
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> those which Tempels had earlier subjected to 'ethnophilosophical' treatment, are wholly

distinct from philosophy. They are in no way comparable with the sources which for an interpreter of, say, Hegelianism, or dialectical materialism, or Freudian theory, or even Confucianism are extant in the explicit texts of Hegel, Marx, Freud or Confucius, in their discursive development as permanently available products of language (Hountondji, 1996. P.42).

The idea here is that given the oral sources of both Tempels (1959) and Kagame (1966), we have no way of settling the question about the nature of the philosophy of Bantu culture when Tempels says this philosophy is dynamic not static, and Kagame disagrees.

2.4. The Philosophy Deficit Problem: This is perhaps the most elaborate objection against ethnophilosophy. According to this line of thinking, ethnophilosophy is defective because it lacks some defining features of philosophy, say "European Philosophy," "19th century philosophy" (Hountondji, 1996, p.60), or "British Philosophy" (Bodunrin, 1981, p. 165). For example, Bodunrin says ethnophilosophy is defective because "[a]s opposed to seeing philosophy as a body of logically argued thoughts of individuals, ethnophilosophers see African philosophy as communal thought and give its emotional appeal as one of its unique features" (Bodunrin, 1981, p. 161). And yet for anything to count as philosophy, Bodunrin insists, one must do the following: (a) state one's case or problem clearly; (b) argue for one's case or view, that is show the philosophical community why we should accept this position, and (c) do (b) by either showing the weakness of rival view or how one's theory solves particular problems (Bodunrin, 1981, p. 172). For Hountondji, philosophy is essentially a reflection on existing body of philosophical literature: "Ethnophilosophy, on the other hand, claims to be the description of an implicit, unexpressed worldview, which never existed anywhere but in the anthropologist's imagination" (Hountondji, 1996, p. 63). Similarly, Ojimba (2022) argues that "[the] problem here is that there is no guarantee that worthwhile philosophy can emerge from the mere analysis of traditional phenomena; instead of such exercises producing valuable philosophy, they, in fact, reduce African philosophy to a

system of worldviews assumed to be shared by a particular African group while distorting the role of the critically reflecting individual" (p. 111).

2.5. The Relevance Problem: Both Oruka (Oruka, Graness, & Kresse, 1997) and Hountondji (Hountondji, 1996) argue that ethnophilosophy is a backward looking philosophy, which has no bearing on the social and developmental problems facing Africa today. Oruka puts the problem this way:

> People like Tempels and Mbiti are busy describing how African people do as a matter of fact think. They have taken the anthropologists' view of thought…But in Africa today the main concern is for the people to get out of the prevailing social conditions, for these conditions harbour the evils of colonialism and neo-colonialism. They are obstacles to freedom. It is therefore an urgent matter that we study not simply how Africans think but rather how they *ought* to think. The consequence from how they 'ought to think' is how they ought to exist. The understanding is that when one exists as one should, one attains freedom (Oruka et al., 1997, pp. 31-32).

In other words, ethnophilosophy is a craven abdication of the intellectual responsibility of the African philosopher to the social and political cause of African people on the continent and beyond.

2.6. The Problem of Racialism: Matolino (2011) argues that Tempels is guilty of the charge of racialism, which is a particular kind of racism based on the idea that the human species have "heritable characteristics" that make it possible to divide them into different races (p.332). He offers three reasons to support this charge. The first is that Tempels "invented" the notion of force and use it to describe the Bantu because he (i.e., Tempels) is committed to the thinking that they are so different from Westerners that they cannot be penetrated by reason, a feature attributed to Western ontology. The notion of force, Matolino claims, is the equivalent of the notion of magic, witchcraft, and irrational fear. Thus, "[f]or Tempels, the white person has a solid philosophical and religious system that is informed by the notion of being, whereas the African is informed by a

superstitious magical system" (Matolino, 2011, p. 339). The second is that while Westerners, in virtue of their ontology, can make distinctions at the level of thought, the Bantu are obsessed with action, specifically with the increase of force. And the third is that the strange and inferior ontology ascribed to the Bantu is the reason why Tempels does not bother with political freedom for the Bantu. Thus, he says "[the Bantu cannot sit on the political table since their qualifying ontological credentials are, for Tempels and his Belgian contemporaries, strange and inferior" (Matolino, 2011, p. 341).

In the next section, I present the first argument for the bona fide thesis.

3. The Great Misconception: The First Argument

Here is the plan of this section. First, I offer exegetical analysis of the works of Mbiti, Tempels, Senghor, and Kagame. Next, I apply the analysis to defuse the six objections that constitute the ethnophilosophical problem.

3.1. Taking Philosophical Texts Seriously

Let us begin by fixing our ideas. In line with the critics, let us say that when we speak of ethnophilosophy, we mean the works of Mbiti, Tempels, Senghor, and Kagame,[3] and any philosophical work that bears sufficient similarity to those works. This restriction is necessary for dialectical reasons and as an acknowledgement that any form of human practice or activity (intellectual, including) is bound to have instances that are defective. Thus, I take the works produced by these authors (Mbiti, Tempels, Senghor, and Kagame) as exemplars of this philosophical orientation. Indeed, since part of the issue under consideration is what ethnophilosophy is really about, this allows us to enter into the discussion without any preconceived notion, especially one that might tilt the discussion in favor of one party rather than the other. Given this provision, it would be a curious objection if one were to point to some problematic examples of the works of ethnophilosophers not included here. "Curious" here

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[3] Bodunrin (1981, p. 161) speaks of Mbiti, Tempels, Senghor, and Kagame as 'representative authors' of ethnophilosophy. I agree.

because such a move would amount to a strawman's argument. Ideally, the argument of any critics against any practice is best served when the critics utilize the best instances or representations of the practice to undermine the relevant practice. And the thought is that if the practice fails in those best instances, it fails everywhere. But conversely, if it succeeds there, it succeeds everywhere irrespective of those defective instances.

Now the first argument for the bona fide thesis: the critics' six objections against ethnophilosophy rest on a *profound* misconception of the method and content of ethnophilosophy, a misconception that has assumed the status of orthodoxy in African philosophy today. Indeed, so alluring is this misconception that I myself have fallen under its spell in the past (Irikefe, 2021). This misconception is the view that ethnophilosophy consists of a wholly costoms-dictated philosophy, or culture philosophy (Oruka, 1983), or the mere presentation of the worldview, myths, and folklores of African people (Bodunrin, 1981), or that of collecting, interpreting, and disseminating African proverbs, folktales, and myths of African people (Wiredu, 1991). I argue that there is no useful rendering of the notions, "wholly-customs-dictated philosophy," or "culture philosophy" or of "collecting, interpreting or disseminating" African proverbs, folktales, and myths of African people or "the presentation of the worldviews and myths of African people," on which the critics secure a useful target in the works of Mbiti, Tempels, Kagame, and Senghor. Again, to reiterate an earlier point, the only way to vet these charges is to focus on the actual texts of these philosophers not the conventional beliefs, or talk, or ideas about them in the discipline.

Begin with Senghor. I would focus here on his epistemology. Senghor's work centres on re-discovering African cultural/civilizational values, which came into sharp relief for him in his sojourn in Paris during his literary studies there and his experience of cultural alienation in Europe in the middle of the 20th century (Bâ, 2015). That experience of suffering and alienation led him to think that the different civilizations and cultures in which people are raised or live lead different people to have different characteristic dispositions on how they conceive and relate to the world and to others, including how they talk, sing, dance, paint, and draw (Senghor, 2023). Taking the

hypothesis further, Senghor posits that European civilization and African civilization lead to different characteristic intellectual dispositions. Notice however, that Senghor's target of European civilization is a very specific target, what he calls "the revolution of 1885" (Senghor, 2023, p. 28), which is Eurocentric modernity and the form of rationality that makes it possible. The "revolution of 1885" for him stands for the Berlin conference and the partition of Africa, a partition mediated by a form of reason that is analytic and discursive since it sees Africa as an object of analysis, partition, and conquest.

In contrast to that form of rationality if not its rejection, Senghor enunciates a distinctive African thinking style using the framework developed by the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, what he calls "the revolution of 1889," which is a reference to the year of the publication of Bergson's *Time and Free Will.* As he himself puts it:

> Since the Renaissance, the values of European civilization had rested essentially on discursive reason and facts, on logic and matter. Bergson, with an eminently dialectical subtlety, answered the expectation of a public weary of scientism and naturalism. He showed that facts and matter, which are the objects of discursive reason, were only the outer surface that had to be transcended by *intuition* in order to achieve a *vision in depth of reality* (Senghor, 2023, p. 28).

Thus, it is within these contrasting visions that Senghor posits "intuition" and its cognate terms, "emotion," "communion," and "relationality" as African characteristic intellectual disposition and ways of grasping reality and of relating to the world.

However, without recourse to this proper context, critics of Senghor rely on remarks such as "[e]motion is Negro as reason is Hellenic" ("*L'émotion est nègre, comme la raison héllène*") (Senghor, 1964, p. 288) to dismiss Senghor's epistemology. And yet Senghor in fact says: "Does this mean, as certain young people would like to interpret my remarks, that the Negro African lacks discursive reason, that he has never used any? I have never said so. In truth every ethnic group possesses different aspects of reason and all the virtues of man, but each has stressed only one aspect of

reason, only certain virtues" (Senghor & Cook, 1964). "Stressed one aspect of *reason*" (italics, mine) is important here because emotion or intuition is not the lack of reason, or its mere absence or negation. Emotion or intuition has its *own* distinctive reason, or more accurately it is a way of rational attunement to the world too (Railton, 2014).

In retrospect, therefore, Senghor was using a philosophical framework drawn from the work of Bergson to shed light on a matter of epistemological/philosophical interest, namely, group thinking or intellectual disposition, and by so doing advanced understanding of this important philosophical topic. When we think of the project this way, we immediately see that Senghor's ethnophilosophy or ethno-epistemology is not an epistemology or a philosophy of a group but a philosophical study of a group, their thinking style and disposition among others. And his method and philosophical claims are a far cry from the concept of ethnophilosophy as a wholly customs-dictated philosophy, or the mere presentation of the worldview, myths, and folklores of African people, or that of collecting, interpreting, and disseminating African proverbs, folktales, and myths of African people. Indeed, at one point in *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Hountondji seemed to have realized this because he says that why ethnophilosophers are busy searching for philosophy in the mythology of African people, their own works represent this philosophical literature. However, the profound implication of this acknowledgement seemed to have escaped Hountondji, and other critics of ethnophilosophy. I will return back to this point because there is a profound confusion even in the acknowledgement, namely, a confusion between sources of philosophy and philosophical claims. Further, Hountondji's observation or acknowledgement here, namely, that the works of ethnophilosophers constitute philosophical literature is inconsistent with his claim that a work can only be categorized as philosophical literature if based on explicitly philosophical texts or sources (Hountondji, 1996, pp. 42-43) since he thinks that folklores, myths, folktales, linguistic usages, and so on do not count as explicitly philosophical texts or sources. This kind of inconsistency makes it such that he thereby gets away with his conclusions about ethnophilosophy.

Like Senghor, Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* is not a wholly customs-dictated philosophy, or the mere presentation of the worldview, myths, and folklores of African people, or of collecting, interpreting or disseminating African proverbs, folktales, and myths of African people. It is also not an implicit philosophy if implicit philosophy stands for something that exists in the subconsciousness of a people such that without as much as any philosophical training, or background one is equipped to say what it means. It is rather as Tempels puts it at the beginning of the work "no more than an hypothesis, a first attempt at the systematic development of what Bantu philosophy is" (Tempels, 1959, p. 18). And that is exactly what Tempels does when, using the concept of "vital force" due to Bergson (1911) that explains both the origin and the common denominator of all living species, he *argues* that such a concept underlies the Bantu conception of life. And here, it is important to notice that Tempels takes care to express this hypothesis as a form of abductive reasoning (i.e., inference to the best explanation where theoretical virtues play an ineliminable role in theory choice) rather than as the critics suggest a mere empirical claim, or ethnographical claim:

> I believe that we should most faithfully render the Bantu thought in European language by saying that Bantu speak, act, live *as if* [italics, mine] for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force. When we think in terms of the concept "being," they use the concept "force." Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. When we say that "beings" are differentiated by their essence or nature, Bantu say that "forces" differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, vegetable and even material or mineral forces (Tempels, 1959, pp. 24-25).

To speak of abductive reasoning here means that when Tempels credits being as forces to the Bantu, he does not presuppose that everyone agrees with it at a conscious level, or even at an unconscious level (implicit level). Again, it is rather what best explains, (from Tempels' point of

view) their attitudes and conducts, both verbal and non-verbal in a wide range of circumstances: their modes of thoughts and speeches (e.g., greetings), their convictions and their fears, as well as their prayers, invocations, hopes, and institutions.[4]

Here is another evidence for the abductive reading of the hypothesis. Tempels says "[i]f the applications of this view of Bantu philosophy yield a satisfactory explanation of observed facts, we may find therein a proof of the validity, even of the exactitude, of our assumptions" (Tempels, 1959, p. 21). Here, like every abductive reasoning, the theoretical virtues such as fruitfulness, explanatory depth, unification, and simplicity (the first two being of more importance to Tempels) provide the ultimate bases for the acceptance of the account. Further, Tempels' account demonstrates a keen awareness of the hierarchy of forces, or beings in the African ontology and their interaction or relationality.

Unlike Tempels and Senghor who utilize Bergson's philosophical framework, Kagame depends on Aristotle's philosophy of being, which like that of Bergson represents a non-modern conception of the world, since for Aristotle, nature is teleological, and there is a recognition of a hierarchy of beings beginning from God to humans, animals, vegetative life, and mineral life.[5] Against initial appearances therefore, there is a certain similarity between these thinkers. Simplifying the account for present purposes, Kagame (1966) claims that every language has a way of organizing, or grouping ideas into class and categories so that "spear" and "knife," for example, fall under the notion of "instrument" and further under the category of "thing." Kagame thinks the insight applies too to the language of the Bantu of Rwanda (i.e., Kinyarwanda), which he claims has four ultimate categories:

1. MUntu=being with intelligence (Man)

2. KIntu=being without intelligence (thing)

[4] Some contemporary African philosophers have sought to defend Tempels work as well. Notable here are Diagne (2016), Etieyibo (2022), Roothaan and Bello (2024).
[5] For an excellent discussion of Aristotle as embodying a non-modern conception of the world, see Anscombe (1958).

3.   HAntu=being indicating locality (place-time)

4.   KUntu=being that expresses mode or manner (in which being is)

The suggestion here is that apart from God, anything that we can think, or conceive of falls under these four categories. And in all these four categories, the recurrent word "ntu" indicates being in its most generic form. Further, Kagame (1966) argues that being is not determined *a priori* but determined by a certain mode of acting. For example, "muntu" would be equivalent to being that acts with intelligence, "kintu" to being that depends on the being with intelligence for its activity, "hantu" to localizing being and "kuntu" to modal being.

   What is important to notice here is the insight about the nature of beings and their modality that we arrive at through Kagame's rigorous analysis of language. Again, we do not find a wholly customs-dictated philosophy, or the mere presentation of the worldview, myths, and folklores of African people, or that of collecting and disseminating African proverbs, folktales, and myths.

   Finally, consider Mbiti's philosophy of time in his ground-breaking work, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti, 1990). He begins the work by stating the guiding philosophical picture:

> Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking and acting of every people, and a study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through word and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind. This involves interpretation of the information before us, and interpretation cannot be completely free of subjective judgment. What, therefore, is 'African Philosophy', may not amount to more than simply my own process of philosophizing the items under consideration: but this cannot be helped, and in any case I am by birth an African (Mbiti, 1990, pp. 1-2).

Here we see the very idea of a purely customs-dictated philosophy, or the mere presentation of African worldviews, myths, and folklores of African people, or of merely collecting, or disseminating African proverbs, folklores, and myths of African people debunked by Mbiti himself. Instead, he claims to be self-consciously engaged in the business of philosophizing, an activity, he says, cannot be helped or avoided in the work. This shows again that the "ethno" in

"ethnophilosophy" is only part of the story. The complete story is that ethnophilosophy is the philosophy of individual African philosophers mediated by the worldview, thinking style, cultural practices, proverbs, folklores, folktales, and languages of African people, that is mediated by, let us say, the common knowledge of African people. Thus, it is ethno/individual philosophy. If I am right, therefore, a term like *Bantu Philosophy* does not signify philosophy of the Bantu people *simpliciter*. Rather, it means the philosophical claims and arguments (abductive arguments mostly) of Tempels, or Kagame based on the common knowledge of the Bantu people. So too is Mbiti's *African Philosophy*.

Take Mbiti's philosophy of time, a subject of philosophical interest to another notable African philosopher, St. Augustine (Augustine & Pusey, 1961). It is important to note here that Mbiti's concern with time is not a self-standing concern but approached as a useful conceptual tool for unpacking the African ontological system. Indeed, this is the context in which his philosophy of time becomes intelligible and outside of which is subject to easy counterexamples, which critics of Mbiti have all too often resorted to in dismissing his profound insight.

To begin with, Mbiti says that time in "traditional African society" is two dimensional, there is actual time, or the now period, the period of immediacy, nearness or nowness (which he calls "Sasa"). Sasa covers the future too. But this is only in a brief mode; the distant future, Mbiti insists, is completely absent in traditional African society in the sense that unlike the Christian teleological history that terminates in a great universal redemption, Africans have no such accounts of messianic hope, or salvation. The past, on the other hand, what he calls the "Zamani" period is very expansive. Zamani is the unlimited past, or the infinite past. However, both Sasa and Zamani are inseparable: the Sasa flows into the Zamani, which is the graveyard of time.

Mbiti offers some evidence for the account. For example, he talks about the East African languages that he has carried out his research, which lack concrete words or expressions for the distant future, as well as the lack of myths of salvation or redemption in African traditional thought system (Mbiti, 1990). However, the main evidence for the account is again a form of abductive

argument, namely, that it best explains several features of African ontology, that is, the widespread belief in God, spirits, ancestors, living-dead, man, animals, plants, and phenomena and objects without biological life in African societies. And the implicit reasoning here is that we should accept the account precisely because of its explanatory virtue. Here is how to see this. In the African world, Mbiti notes, there is a transition of human life, and this transition moves backward from the Sasa to the Zamani, that is, from birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed, and finally entry into the community of the spirits, which coincide with the Zamani period. Thus, African ontology is best explained by a concept of a backward transition of time from the Sasa to the Zamani. Further, Mbiti notes, there is a distinction between the spirits and the living-dead, a distinction we can make intelligible with the Sasa-Zamani distinction. And here is how to see this: Whereas the living-dead are spirits in the Sasa period; the "pure" spirits, as it were, are those in the Zamani period. In turn, this different "temporality" signifies a certain ontological hierarchy: spirit, living-dead, and then human beings. Hence, Mbiti (1990) says becoming spirits is in a sense "a social elevation" (p.79). And for this reason, too, African peoples show respect and high regard "for their living-dead and for some of the important spirits" (p.80).

Overall, Mbiti's work is a serious philosophical analysis of time in relation to African ontology, and once again, shows that the critics' characterization of ethnophilosophy rests on a profound mistake. Of course, one might disagree with Mbiti's account. But that would be a different matter entirely.[6]

3.2.   The Ethnophilosophical Problem Reconsidered

In the light of the above considerations, the six objections against ethnophilosophy are mistaken because they are based on a profound misunderstanding and misconception of ethnophilosophy.

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[6] That said, I think critics are well within their right to claim that Mbiti extrapolated his larger explanation from too small a pool of examples and did not acknowledge other examples that would lead to a different conclusion. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pointing this out to me.

To start with, ethnophilosophy has no *audience problem* because it is a substantive philosophical contribution to the African philosophical tradition. Indeed, in the actual course of history (more than half a century since Tempels first published his *Bantu Philosophy*), it is within the continent and within African philosophical literature the work and that of other ethnophilosophers have had profound impact and gained serious scholarly interest.[7] It is true of course that Tempels, writing in the spirit of the colonial period, titled one of the chapters, "Bantu philosophy and our mission to civilize." However, when considered within the broader context of the entire work, the title seems merely an exercise in public relations (PR), intended to assuage the anxiety of Tempels' patrons back in Europe with respect to the major content of the work. Indeed, as Abiola Irele rightly noted in the introduction to Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, despite such a title and despite the occasional condescending tone of Tempels, "the concessions which Tempels had to make were on such a scale as to imply the total recognition of the African mind in its own individuality" (Hountondji, 1996, p. 17).

The *primitive unanimity problem* also rests on a profound misunderstanding. It is based in part on the mischaracterization of ethnophilosophy and in part on an excessive allegiance to a summative view of group belief or knowledge. The mischaracterization here is the confusion between the sources of ethnophilosophy and the claims and arguments of ethnophilosophy. We have seen that the claims of Mbiti, Senghor, Kagame, and Tempels are deeply philosophical claims, which draw from the common knowledge of African people. However, the suggestion that instead of those claims standing as their philosophy we should take the common knowledge, or the sources themselves as their actual philosophy seems disingenuous. It is analogous to taking the premise of an argument as the argument itself rather than as mere premise within the broader argument. Recall that the critics (e.g., Hountondji, 1996) argue that those sources are not philosophical and cannot

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[7] Those interested in the work include the critics themselves who *argue* against it, such as the self-styled professional philosophers, and their contemporary sympathizers, and   friends of ethnophilosophy who seek to defend it.

constitute the *bases* of a philosophical literature as earlier noted.[8] What should we say then to that view? We should say the following: Suppose the view is correct, it would lead to the implausible conclusion that no philosophy exists today in that technical sense because as a tradition, philosophy even in that technical sense would have to start somewhere, historically speaking. And since that starting point would presuppose, by definition, that no philosophical texts or sources exist yet at that moment, philosophy would never get started, with the wild implication that no philosophy exists today. I argue that since it is a platitude that philosophy exists today even in that technical sense, we should reject the view. Alternatively, one might read Hountondji as saying that merely presenting those sources as philosophy means one is engaged in something not distinctively philosophical since those sources themselves are not philosophical. But again, this takes us back to the profound mischaracterization of the works of the ethnophilosophers we have considered.

The summative assumption on the other hand is the view (in group ontology) that one may attribute group belief or knowledge just in case all, or at least, most members have the relevant belief. In the debate on social ontology, this is called the *summative view* of group belief/knowledge (Gilbert, 1987, 2004). But the summative view is not the only model of group belief/knowledge, and it is not even the most plausible (Bird, 2014; Gilbert, 1987). Beside that view, there is also the *distributive view* of group knowledge or group belief, which claims that a proposition can be the object of group belief or group knowledge just in case it is the outcome of a process of division of epistemic labour among members of a group. With minor modifications, this seems to be the working assumption of most ethnophilosophers since on this view, you can attribute knowledge/belief to a group if you rely on the experts in that group, or if you rely for your premise on the culture, or the common wisdom, or knowledge of that group as enunciated in their publicly proclaimed traditions (including in this case, folklores, folktales, and the likes).

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[8] Just to remind the reader. Here is Hountondji again: "Unfortunately, in the case of African 'philosophy' there are no sources; or at least, if they exist, they are not philosophical *texts* or *discourses*. Kagamé's 'institutionalized records', or those which Tempels had earlier subjected to 'ethnophilosophical' treatment, are wholly distinct from philosophy" (Hountondji, 1996, p. 42).

Turn next to the third problem, the *settled consensus problem.* This assumes that philosophical debates must always be resolvable. And since oral sources do not always lead to resolutions of philosophical debates it deems them unphilosophical. But most philosophical debates have been unresolvable even when philosophers were relying on written sources. Think here of the "free will problem," and the many other philosophical problems that have failed to yield settled consensus in Western philosophy (the knowledge problem, the problem of other minds, etc.). If so, the fact that oral sources do not always lead to consensus does not make them unphilosophical (as useful philosophical sources).

The fourth problem, that is, the *philosophy deficit problem*, equally rests on a misunderstanding of ethnophilosophy, as well as, on questionable assumptions about the nature of rational beliefs and philosophy. Let us start with the mischaracterization. The critics think that ethnophilosophy is merely the philosophy of a group, where the group is imagined to be doing the philosophizing, period. But this seems flatly false. Ethnophilosophy, as we have seen, is more accurately labelled "ethno/individual" philosophy because it is the philosophy of the individual African thinker mediated by the common knowledge of African people. Similarly, the critics think that ethnophilosophy presents folktales, folklores, proverbs (for short, common knowledge of African people) as philosophy. But the philosophical *claims* of Mbiti on time/ontology, of Tempels on being and forces, of Senghor on thinking traits and dispositions, and of Kagame on language and ontology do not lend support to that thinking.

Let us turn to the assumptions. There are two major assumptions here. The first is that rational belief is creditable only to the individual thinker or believer, an assumption rooted in the work of Descartes. Recall that the Cartesian epistemological paradigm was, in effect, an attempt to make rationality rests on the lone individual who must ascertain beliefs that are warrantable using *his/her* own rational resources. This is also the legacy of the cogito argument: "I think, therefore I am." The second assumption is that philosophy is about deductive argumentation operating in an adversarial system. Here philosophers are like competing opponents in the game of truth, where

they seek to show the strength of their own views by knocking down rival views using the method of criticism and argumentation.

However, it seems reasonable to say that these are mere assumptions or "ideology" that in the context of decolonization deserves further scrutiny. Take the Cartesian model of rational belief, which has no recognition of group belief and group epistemology. The question to ask here is, Is it credible to think that the set of rational beliefs that the person on the street holds, even the most highly educated class of people who lives in a scientifically inclined environment is rational because the person has himself, or herself vetted these beliefs using his or her own resources only? That the answer is likely to be in the negative shows the lop-sidedness of the Cartesian picture of rationality. Further, the deductive model is not the only model of doing philosophy even within mainstream philosophy. Besides the deductive model, there is also the abductive model, which we have shown to be the general structure of the ethnophilosophical claims we have considered. One notable analytic philosopher whose work exemplifies this form of philosophy is David Lewis. Indeed, when Lewis presented his famous thesis on the plurality of worlds, his evidence for this bold speculative claim was a form of abductive argument. He says:

> Why believe in a plurality of worlds? - Because the hypothesis is serviceable, and that is a reason to think that it is true. The familiar analysis of necessity as truth at all possible worlds was only the beginning. In the last two decades, philosophers have offered a great many more analyses that make reference to possible worlds, or to possible individuals that inhabit possible worlds. I find that record most impressive. I think it is clear that talk of possibilia has clarified questions in many parts of the philosophy of logic, of mind, of language, and of science - not to mention metaphysics itself. Even those who officially scoff often cannot resist the temptation to help themselves abashedly to this useful way of speaking (Lewis, 1986, p. 3).

Note that in citing this, I do not mean to show that ethnophilosophers are like Lewis and are fine for that reason alone. That would only lend force to the inferior status of ethnophilosophy as claimed by the critics. On the contrary, I mean to show that the very paradigm that some of the critics usually rely—Western philosophy, British philosophy, etc.—to dismiss ethnophilosophy engages in philosophizing in just the way ethnophilosophers do.

The fifth problem, the relevance problem, is equally mistaken. Ethnophilosophy has no *relevance problem* because it is not a backward-looking philosophy. Indeed, one might think that as Africa negotiates its identity in the contemporary era, it is of the greatest importance and urgency that we are furnished with an adequate ontological, axiological, and epistemological compass. And that is the right way to read Senghor, Tempels, Kagame, and Mbiti. The alternative to this form of discourse or caution is to be philosophically oblivious of the past in search for the future. However, such a mode of inquiry and thinking would be catastrophic in the light of the legacies of slavery and colonialism in Africa.

And finally, Tempels' philosophy does not have the problem of racialism. In fact, Tempels' working assumption was that the Bantu ontology and the mode of reasoning that it implies, is superior to the analytic form of thinking and the static ontology Western philosophy is based on. And he is not alone here. Bergson, from whom Tempels owed his intellectual debt to, thought so as well, what Senghor calls the revolution of 1889. In the same vein, another prominent French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty (1969) railed against the analytic mode of thinking, which he traced to Descartes. For he notes that "analytical reflection does not bring us back to authentic subjectivity; it conceals from us the vital node of perceptual consciousness because it looks for the conditions in which absolutely determinate being is possible, and is dazzled by the theological view, falsely regarded as self-evident, that nothingness is nothing" (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 52). So, it is incorrect to claim, as does Matolino (2011) that Tempels believed in heritable characteristics, and that he invented the notion of force for the Bantu people as a way of legitimizing their inferiority. In the same vein, it is incorrect to claim that Tempels ascribed the obsession with increasing vital

force to the Bantu whereas Westerners are posited as being capable of thought, for he explicitly says that "it is even more true, I venture to think, that the Bantu…live more than we do by Ideas and by following their own ideas" (Tempels, 1959, p. 11). And finally, the best explanation why Tempels never engaged political philosophy and liberties for the Bantu (if we accept that claim for the sake of the argument; more on this in the next section) cannot be that he thought the Bantu were inferior and underserving of liberties. There is no textual basis for that claim in Tempels (1959), and the principle of charity does not permit that kind of inference.

That concludes the first argument for the bona fide thesis. In the next section, I present the second argument, roughly the claim that ethnophilosophers were engaged in something much more interesting and positive.

4. Towards a New Framework for Ethnophilosophy: Ethnophilosophy as Decolonization

I wish to highlight and defend a particular way of thinking of ethnophilosophy, namely, as a form of decolonization that is distinctively epistemic. Mitova (2020, 2023) has given a brilliant and the most coherent account of this form of decolonization (see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), and in what follows, I present that framework, and then apply it to ethnophilosophy.

4.1. The Framework

Mitova begins her analysis by situating decolonization in the kind of unjust epistemic world in which we *now* live where one part of the world (the Global North) continues to be the measure of what count as knowledge, science, and rational thought for another part of the world (the Global South). Part of the reason for this situation, she claims, is that the "epistemic master" is committed to the notion that "his ideas about knowledge and other epistemically good things are objective and universal. They are not tainted by the contingencies of place or time. This is what puts them in a unique position to reflect the world as it really is. This is what legitimize their continued sovereignty over the South's thoughts and epistemic practices" (Mitova, 2020, p. 191). It is precisely this kind of global epistemic injustice that lends urgency to a decolonization that is distinctively

epistemic. As Mitova (2020) puts it "[t]he call to epistemic decolonisation is, in the first instance, a call to dismantle this way of thinking and its self-arrogated hegemonic authority. In the second instance, it is a call to re-centre the knowledge enterprise onto our geo-historical here and now" (p.191). Notice the double aspirations here. She spells them out as follows.

First, epistemic decolonization involves negative and positive programs, where the negative program requires the elimination of "unreflective Western influences on our knowledge supplies and production" and the positive program requires the "proactive utilization of the marginalised epistemic resources of the colonised in the advancement of knowledge in various fields" (Mitova, 2020, p. 193; Wiredu, 2002). Second, epistemic decolonization involves what she calls "epistemic re-centring," again, with negative and positive dimensions, where the negative dimension involves the rejection of the universal idea of knowledge and other epistemic goods, "centred around a disembodied and dislocated subject" (Mitova, 2020, p. 194). It is instructive to note that this idea of disembodied and dislocated knower is that of a Cartesian subject, ungrounded in no particularity of place, community, history, gender, and sexuality, and bears no coherent relation with its body, in fact, that body is an inert matter (i.e., a mere object). The positive dimension of this re-centring involves correcting the broken human relationship that stems from the racial and social classification of humans (Mitova, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), and the crediting of marginalized knowledge systems with credibility and epistemic authority, and marginalized knowers with the freedom to speak about their world and themselves in their own voices. And finally, epistemic decolonization is an on-going process, and not a once-off affair, or event (Mitova, 2020).

In another paper titled "Why epistemic decolonization in Africa?" written in response to critics of the project of decolonization such as Matolino (2020) (and Táíwò (2022)), she provides a more fine-grained account of the notion, paying closer attention to its positive dimension. She defines epistemic decolonization as follows:

(1) A process of dynamic and diachronic epistemic recentring to Africans' geo-political location, with the attendant right to choose one's epistemic endeavours in accordance with one's interests (*Recentring*), (2) which aims at, and is constrained by, only thin political benefits such as justice and empowerment (*Thin politics*), (3) in which the decolonising subjects assume responsibility for ensuring such benefits (*Responsibility*), (4) and in which the use of indigenous resources is constrained by their usefulness for thriving in a global world and for globalising knowledge to that world (*Globalising*) (Mitova, 2023, p. 749).

Let me briefly say something about these conditions. The condition of "recentring" deals with the challenge that decolonization is caught up with defining oneself merely in relation to the colonial past, the condition of "thin politics" deals with the challenge that decolonization might overpoliticize the knowledge project, the condition of "responsibility" deals with the challenge that decolonization might neglect the complicity of formerly colonized subjects, and the condition of globalizing ensures that formerly colonized subjects are equipped to be responsive to the demands of the global world.

How do all these apply to ethnophilosophy? The next section addresses that question.

4.2. Ethnophilosophy and Epistemic Decolonization

Ethnophilosophy is a form of epistemic decolonization in its negative and positive dimensions or programs. In the negative dimension, ethnophilosophy involves the rejection of the universal model of knowledge and the knowing subject, ungrounded in no particularity of place, history, and community. This is what is affirmed in Tempels, Senghor, Mbiti, and Kagame by their conscious and deliberate attempts to think from social and historical standpoints—the Bantu, the Yorubas, the Congolese, the African, and so on. It is also a rejection of a central feature of Eurocentric modernity, namely, the idea of nature /object as a realm of pure inert matter, and the capitalist exploitation it underpins in slavery, colonialism, and beyond. This is especially true in Tempels, Senghor, and Kagame, who adopted a non-modern conception of the world, whether in the

embrace of the anti-intellectualistic tradition that flowered in Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or in the embrace of Aristotle's non-modern conception of the world and for whom nature is imbued with purpose and meaning and deserving of respect. It is also true of Mbiti who says:

> It emerges clearly that for African peoples, this is a religious universe. Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon: it is filled with religious significance… Traditional African societies have been neither deaf nor blind to the spiritual dimension of existence, which is so deep, so rich and so beautiful (Mbiti, 1990, p. 56).

Further, ethnophilosophy is a rejection of the idea that we must do philosophy and think in the way the "epistemic master" would have us do, and that their standard must be our standard, as if the space of knowledge production is exhausted by what they say. Relatedly, it is a rejection of the individual model of rational thought and thinking that paradoxically led a number of the critics of ethnophilosophy to its rejection. What is important to notice here is not that a philosopher should find such a model of rational belief and philosophy attractive but that this model should be assumed to bear the hallmark of universal truth and validity such that a philosophical orientation that departs from it is for that reason problematic. Against that thinking, Mbiti insists that "[o]nly in terms of other people does the individual becomes conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 106). This socio-historical precondition to existence includes not just the social and the moral but also the epistemic, that is, the domain of rational beliefs.

Ethnophilosophy also instantiates the positive dimension/program insofar as it involves the proactive utilization of African subalternized and marginalized knowledge systems, and sources, such as, African personality, folklores, folktales, myths, proverbs, art, poetry, African languages, and the heritage of suffering in doing philosophy and in thinking more generally. In Mbiti, this is achieved in terms of a distinct African ontology grounded in a conception of time, and in Senghor, it is articulated in Afro-civilizational values and the Black African art (Senghor, 2023). The sources

of knowledge on the list above is sufficiently general not to warrant a separate treatment here. But there is one that is worth commenting on: the heritage of suffering. The heritage of suffering here is a strong theme in Senghor's poems (Bâ, 2015), and one which clearly has a strong epistemological significance. And the thought is that the African perspective, which is grounded in the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and the continued colonial domination of the Global South in the present era, as well as the testimonial injustice associated with these experiences should and ought to be a source of knowledge and of philosophizing for the African. Doing so is not merely to enrich the pool of global knowledge but amounts to decolonizing the ideal if not the image of the God-eyed point of view that afflicts much thinking and philosophizing in the disciplines today.

Moreover, ethnophilosophy is amenable to the four desiderata that Mitova (2023) speaks about, and on that ground can meet the objections raised by Matolino (2020) and Táíwò (2022) as well. It is, for example, an endeavor aimed at choosing one's epistemic endeavor in a way that aligns with one's interest. It also seeks thin political goals such as justice and empowerment of African people. This might be surprising to some critics who normally think that ethnophilosophers hardly cared about justice and social empowerment for Africans. Such a view arises, I claim, because one is thinking of justice only in terms of domestic justice. Of course, domestic justice is a legitimate goal, no doubt. But there is also the place of global epistemic (in)justice and the structures of dominations that keep marginalized people in a subalternized place. And this is something that the ethnophilosophers were deeply concerned about. Indeed, ethnophilosophy in the works of the pioneering thinkers—Tempels, Mbiti, Kagame and Senghor—is a struggle for Africa to be free, that is, for Africans to be free to think, which is a condition for the possibility of other kinds of freedom. Further, ethnophilosophy meets the condition of responsibility because each of the four ethnophilosophers considered here was engaged in ethno/individual philosophy, and not just the "ethno," and in that way, each pointed in his own way to the intellectual responsibility that Africans have to their society and heritage. And finally, ethnophilosophy meets the globalizing condition because it posits that for Africans to

thrive in the world, they must be rooted in their culture, language, knowledge systems, and practices. In other words, they must look towards the future with an eye to the past. And only with an eye to the past can they construct a future that is authentic, vibrant, and stable.

If I am right, critics of ethnophilosophy should see in it a worthy ally for the ambition they set for African philosophy and the continent. For example, Hountondji (2002) speaks of the need for Africans to be able to engage in autonomous inquiry. He says:

> The creation of an autonomous body of thought had to begin with the effort to formulate original set of questions, not out of a search for novelty for its own sake, but out of a concern for authenticity, of a desire to be oneself by freely asking questions that one spontaneously asks oneself and by trying to raise them to a higher level of formulation, rather than by passively accepting the questions that others ask themselves or ask us from their own preoccupations. (Hountondji, 2002, p. 139)

But this is a goal that the ethnophilosophers actively pursued in their own projects. For example, Senghor's work on African civilizational values was driven, as earlier noted, by his own journey of self-discovery and the realization that the dominant European paradigm fails to capture something very distinctive about his own heritage. Thus, the ethnophilosophical inquiry he engaged, and the insights he attained are fairly attributable to his inner impulse rooted in a deep historical and cultural consciousness.

The same analysis applies to a critic like Ojimba (2022), who urges Africans to embrace "the notion of the universality of human reason, the capacity of thought generated in one culture to resonate in other cultures"(p. 113). But again, as we have seen, that was the form of inquiry engaged by Tempels and Kagame who leaned heavily on thinkers from different cultures such as the French philosopher, Bergson, and the Greek philosopher, Aristotle respectively. They did that presumably because they believed that the capacity of thought can resonate across cultures.

That brings the second argument for the bona fide thesis to a close.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for what I called the *bona fide thesis* about ethnophilosophy, a thesis that makes a claim about the positive status of ethnophilosophy. I sought to vindicate the thesis by offering two main arguments. The first is that the ethnophilosophical problem rests on a profound misunderstanding and misconception of ethnophilosophy in the great works of Senghor, Tempels, Mbiti, and Kagame. The second is that ethnophilosophy constitutes a form of decolonization, epistemic or epistemological decolonization. This second argument also goes to demonstrate the significance of ethnophilosophy, and indeed African philosophy in the contemporary struggle against global epistemic distributive injustice, that is the injustice that pertains to the credibility, esteem, and trustworthiness of voices and knowledge sources in non-Western societies.[9]

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