The "Ethnophilosophy" Problem: How the Idea of "Social Imaginaries" may Remedy it.

Abstract

The work argues that engaging Africa's cultural and epistemic resources as social imaginaries, and not as metaphysical or ontological 'essences,' could help practitioners of African philosophy overcome the cluster of shortcomings and undesirable features associated with "ethnophilosophy." A number of points are outlined to buttress this claim. First, the framework of social imaginaries does not operate with the false assumption that Africa's cultural forms and epistemic resources are static and immutable. Second, this framework does not lend itself to sweeping generalizations about Africa or large swathes of it. Third, the framework of social imaginaries remedies ethnophilosophy's problem of collectivism. Fourth, unlike ethnophilosophy, it does not romanticize and canonize a supposedly 'idyllic' African past, which militates against a realistic and forward-looking philosophizing. Finally, with the framework of social imaginaries, Africa's indigenous cultural and epistemic resources become amenable to being engaged with critical philosophical rigor. This not only enhances their potential for cross-cultural philosophical conversation but also enhances their usefulness for addressing current sociopolitical issues affecting Africa. The discussion in this paper somewhat touches upon the question of *method* in African philosophy, using the ethnophilosophy problem to navigate the vast gamut of issues involved.

Key Words: African Philosophy; Ethnophilosophy; Social Imaginaries; Cross-cultural philosophy; Paulin Hountondji, Charles Taylor.

Introduction

Emerging from the colonial experience, an experience whose racist undertone questioned the very capacity of the African to *think*, the first task that confronted postcolonial African philosophers was to determine whether Africa has any 'philosophies' at all – indeed whether the two terms "Africa" and "philosophy" were mutually exclusive. After decades of debate, that question is apparently settled – thankfully – with a resoundingly affirmative answer.

However, I do think that concomitant questions of method, how to engage indigenous philosophical resources that might go into the making of African philosophy/philosophies, the precise form(s) African philosophy (as an academic discipline) should take, and the kind of writings to be counted as African philosophical writings, are far from being settled about half a century down the line. Makwinja (2018) has rightly cautioned against exaggerating the question of method, as was the case with the question of the existence of African philosophy, suggesting that the issue of method will be shaped in the very process of addressing concrete

philosophical issues. Yet it cannot be gainsaid – even on Makwinja's own terms – that any attention given to ethnophilosophy as a philosophical issue, will *at the same time* shape the method of doing African philosophy.

To be sure, African philosophy is not stuck in the ethnophilosophy debate. But there is a sense in which the ethnophilosophy problem perhaps assumes the dimension of a "specter," reminiscent of the one Marx & Engels (2018: 19) refer to. This is true, especially if one considers that the question of ethnophilosophy is directly or indirectly implicated in the wider issues that affect the theory and practice of African philosophy. Moreover, trappings of ethnophilosophy continue to manifest in the ways African philosophy is being done today, a situation that has led to an "extensive period of soul-searching…on the part of African philosophers over how philosophy in the African context should be construed" (Hallen 2010: 76).

More light will be thrown on the notion of "ethnophilosophy" shortly. But, in a nutshell, it is a certain 'genre' of writings that passes itself off as 'African philosophy,' but are mere descriptive narratives of aspects of African life and thought. The 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.' Shot through with essentialization, generalization, collectivization, romaticization, and unfounded assumption, ethnophilosophy is generally said to lack the critical rigor befitting the word "philosophy." Paulin Hountondji is arguably the most famous critic of ethnophilosophy, elaborated in his *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983). Many others have done same under different styles and methods. I wish to state unequivocally that the sense of ethnophilosophy that I engage in this article is the pejoratives sense outlined above, the sense in which it connotes an uncritical and merely descriptive presentation of Africa's cultural materials. I do so because it provides the best backdrop for the objectives of this article.

Having said that, I acknowledge that the notion of "ethnophilosophy" has become much more nuanced. Indeed, a more positive connotation of ethnophilosophy has emerged among African scholars in recent times. For instance, while some scholars have already begun to assert the 'criticality' of ethnophilosophy (Mangena 2014), others make conscious attempts to develop a sort of 'critical ethnophilosophy,' which possesses a sufficient amount of critical and philosophical rigor while still rooted in Africa's cultural resources (Agada 2019). Such a noble project, in whatever form it might appear, is essentially in line with my objective. In my case, however, I draw heavily on the concept of "social imaginary," as specifically provided by Charles Taylor – because I find it particularly useful for exploring the relevant issues at stake.

Being ‘original’ may be understood in different ways and may always be a contestable claim to make. But I believe that exploring the idea of “social imaginaries,” in a specifically Taylorian sense, in order to remedy the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy (as famously elaborated by Hountondji) makes a modest, if not novel, contribution to the discussion on ethnophilosophy.

The aim of this article is to show that "social imaginaries" framework is a useful framework for making sense of the cultural and epistemic resources that go into the making of African philosophy in a manner that remedies the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy. The work is not aimed at discrediting other frameworks. Indeed, it leaves room for, say, the metaphysical/ontological framework, with the proviso that ‘metaphysics’ or ‘ontology’ is not imposed on cultural forms and epistemic resources that properly belong to the socio-epistemic realm.

I use the term, "social imaginaries," in the sense in which Charles Taylor describes them as a "repertory" of background, taken-for-granted knowledges and understandings that inform social life and practices (Taylor 2004:25). Though they do not assume a rock-solid structure, social imaginaries are indeed *real,* significant, and powerful, because they drive and motivate concrete societal practices. Life in society draws from the vast repertoire of a people’s social imaginaries.

My key argument then is: if practitioners of African philosophy would engage indigenous cultural knowledges and epistemic resources as "social imaginaries" and treat them as such in their philosophizing, the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy, especially as elaborated by Hountondji, could be overcome. This is because the social imaginaries framework possesses features that serve as a counterpoint to these shortcomings, as I shall demonstrate.

The article proceeds in this simple order. In the first section, I present some of the most recent and remarkable interventions in the ethnophilosophy debate. Then, drawing largely on Paulin Hountondji, perhaps the most prominent critic of ethnophilosophy, I disclose the salient features of ethnophilosophy relevant for the present purposes. In the second section, I explain the notion of "social imaginaries," drawing on relevant scholars, the most important being Charles Taylor. This step is important because it prepares the ground for the task that I undertake subsequently by furnishing a 'handy' understanding of the tool to be used for it. In the third (final) section, I demonstrate how this idea of social imaginaries could be used to remedy the cluster of shortcomings associated with ethnophilosophy.

1. Ethnophilosophy and its Critique

In this section, I briefly engage some of the most recent and remarkable interventions in the ethnophilosophy debate. Because Hountondji's famous critique serves the purposes of the present work perhaps more than any other, I eventually zero in on Hountondji. I outline, but also attempt to *reconstruct*, what I take to be the main issues in Hountondji's now famous critique of ethnophilosophy.

To begin, I note that the most recent debate on ethnophilosophy among African scholars turns on the question as to whether ethnophilosophy may be considered African philosophy in its own right. In other words, it basically tries to ascertain if ethnophilosophy possesses the requisite rigor, abstraction and potential universal applicability that might earn it the name of philosophy. As I see it, interventions from scholars are quite nuanced and are like a spectrum, ranging from those who vehemently defend ethnophilosophy as philosophy through those who steer the middle course (i.e., those who regard it as 'proto-philosophy' that could form the basis of 'real' philosophizing) to those who vehemently refuse to accord it the status of philosophy.

Fainos Mangena vigorously defends the idea that ethnophilosophy possesses all the requisite characteristics of philosophy. He grounds his claim on the view that so-called collective worldviews, easily dismissed as being uncritical, are indeed sufficiently critical. These worldviews are not careless assertions but have been arrived at through a circumspect attention to events and realities of life. According to him, the very act of reasoning is an "analytical task" involving the two mental processes of induction and deduction. As such, he regrets that "most definitions of ethno-philosophy, especially by professional philosophers, have tended to focus on the 'collection' task, thereby deliberately ignoring the 'analysis' task" (Mangena 2014: 31–32). Africans have always had the capacity for critical and rigorous reasoning, he maintains. Therefore, to deny that ethnophilosophy is genuine philosophy amounts to denying this most fundamental fact of reasoning. This, in turn, stems from the assumption that being 'critical' and 'analytical' must be defined in terms of the West. Edwin Etieyibo (2019) shares Mangena's positive disposition towards ethnophilosophy, insisting that it is "genuine philosophy."

Ada Agada adopts what I may call the 'middle course' in this debate, for he neither dismisses ethnophilosophy offhandedly nor admits it to the full status of philosophy. Instead, he takes African 'folk' philosophy to be "proto-philosophy," indeed raw materials upon which more critical, rigorous and universalizable philosophy could be built. Steering this middle course, Agada (2019: 9) submits: "Like Mangena, I think ethno-philosophy deserves more

respect than has been so far granted it. Unlike Mangena, however, I do not think that ethno-philosophy should be equated with African philosophy on account of its critical and constructive deficiency." So, to Agada, ethnophilosophy is useful, but is critically and constructively deficient. I should note here that Agada's stance resonates with the basic sentiments of this article. For I believe that ethnophilosophy has something of value, while I go ahead to propose a framework – the "social imaginaries" framework – that could potentially remedy the deficiencies thereof. This is the task I broach in section three. In the meantime, I complete the picture by looking at the other end of the spectrum where there is little or no sympathy for ethnophilosophy.

At the other extreme of the spectrum is Bernard Matolino's intolerance of ethnophilosophy. To Matolino, ethnophilosophy is not only an "invented" discourse but also a "dead" discourse. Drawing heavily on Hountondji's famous critique (which I shall painstakingly outline), Matolino notes that ethnophilosophy, together with its claims, were "invented" to advance racist and colonialist agenda, albeit in a subtle form. Matolino (2019: 116) uses so many uncomplimentary terms to describe ethnophilosophy, referring to it as "a disreputable trend in African philosophy" that has "continuously misrepresented the black person as lacking precise and clear logic." In terms of societal relevance, he submits: "Weighed down by its essentialism, ethnophilosophy can never be relevant or useful for the African who either seeks to fix herself in her authentic roots or seeks a useful frame of reference in her theorization" (2019: 116). Coming out strongly against African scholars sympathetic to ethnophilosophy, he wonders why anyone would still think that anything good might come out of what he takes to be a fundamentally flawed scholarly agenda. Overall, Matolino's critique turns on these issues: ethnophilosophy as an "invented" and "dead" discourse, its unwarranted assumption of unanimity, propensity to generalization, immutable essentialism, and the lack of concrete relevance.

As I said earlier, Matolino and so many others draw heavily on Hountondji, who not only has a more exhaustive critique of ethnophilosophy but also has dedicated much of his scholarship to addressing the ethnophilosophy problem. On these grounds, I submit, there is hardly any better scholar to engage on this theme than Hountonji. My proposal on the appropriation of the "social imaginaries" framework directly speaks to the issues raised by Hountondji (and by extension, Matolino and others). In what follows, I pay more attention to Hountondji. It will be seen that the above issues raised by Matolino had been anticipated and more poignantly and exhaustively presented by Houndonji.

Hountondji's Critique

Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy is chiefly contained in his famous work, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983). The main targets of his critique are well-known pioneering works posturing as 'African philosophy.' He gives much attention to such works as Placide Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* (1945 – first published), Alexis Kagamé's *La Philosophie bantou-rwandaise d'être* (1956), and Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* (1965). His critique also extents to the works of L.S. Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, William Abraham, J.S. Mbiti and all such early writings that lay claim to being 'African philosophy' (Hountondji 1983: 59). For the present purposes, I shall not so much concern myself with specific remarks directed at any of these works as disclosing the cluster of features/traits of ethnophilosophy.

Hountondji (1983: 45, 48) raises the question of *audience*, arguing that ethnophilosophy "faces Europe," that is, it is motivated by an uncalled-for desire to "rehabilitate" Africa in the eyes of an imaginary Western audience. The work of Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, provides a typical example of this default posture of "facing" Europe. Hountondji suggests that Tempels' motivation for writing *Bantu Philosophy* was perhaps the urge to prove to his European audience that those 'poor' Africans among whom he worked had some 'rationality' (which he equated with 'philosophy') and are therefore fit for the 'civilizing' and 'salvific' mission Europe had imposed on itself. Perhaps it was meant to serve as a missionary handbook of sorts for future evangelizers that might presumably provide a rough guide into the 'soul' of the African to facilitate the mission of evangelization and colonization. Matolino (2019: 116) reiterates this point when he finds in *Bantu Philosophy* an "intriguing combination of racism and colonial fawning … to aid the success of the colonial mission."

In Hountondji's estimation, Alexis Kagamé, who was himself Rwandese, did better than Tempels, but "remained on the whole the prisoner of an ideological myth" (Hountondji 1983: 43). He thinks that, both Kagamé, the philosophers of the "negritude" movement (especially Césaire and Senghor) and other pioneer African intellectuals still found themselves "facing" Europe. They made themselves something of overzealous spokespersons to prove the point to the likes of Lévy-Bruhl (and other Western scholars who held racist views on Africans) that Africans did not possess a "primitive mentality" after all.

This default intellectual disposition – i.e., the self-imposed task of putting up a resistance, of 'talking back' at an imaginary Western adversary – has dire consequences. For instance, the ethnophilosopher becomes at best reactionary. His efforts becomes "a rearguard action … inasmuch as the assertion of one's difference goes hand in hand with a passionate urge

to have it recognized by the Other" (Hountondji 1983: 44). The "Other" that Hountondji here refers to is, no doubt, the white – the West.

I find Hountondji's submission in this respect apt. And I should add that this reactionary disposition perhaps stems from the unconscious psychological hangovers of colonization that practitioners of African philosophy still contend with. More often than not, it works against the scholar, and even makes him/her shoot himself/herself in the leg. This calls to mind the famous assertion by the Senegalese "negritude" intellectual, L.S. Senghor (1998: 439) to the effect that reason is white while emotion is black. Fanon has criticized Senghor for descending that low, as it were, in a bid to prove that the black is 'different' (Fanon 1967). Elsewhere, Olufemi Taiwo (2010: 47) has lambasted this "metaphysics of difference," as he calls it, the instinctual desire "to prove to the rest of the world that Africa is so different that any time African phenomena are to be talked about, new words and concepts must be fashioned for that purpose." I should add that, rather than prove a point, it ends up nourishing the Other's (i.e., the West's) almost insatiable craving for 'exoticism.' Hountondji (1983: 43) would say that it is nothing short of affirming what the Other (the likes of Lévy-Bruhl) already thinks about Africa and the African. Africa becomes a mere object of ethnological and anthropological curiosity rather than an equal conversation partner. Of course, Senghor would not be prepared to accept the scandalous conclusions that could be drawn from his assertion. But then, the ethnophilosophical "rearguard" temperament, as Hountondji calls it, inadvertently led him to such self-defeating assertion.

Another issue Hountondji raises against ethnophilosophy besides the problem of creating an *imaginary Western interlocutor* and the attendant "rearguard" mentality, is the problem of *collectivism*. Ethnophilosophy reduces philosophy to collective worldviews (*Weltanschauung*), cosmologies and mythologies. Hountondji (1983: 54, 59) cites popular titles and terms that betray this collectivist mindset – "Luba ontology," "Dogon metaphysics," "black metaphysics," "Yoruba philosophy of life," etc. The first unpalatable implication of this collectivism is what Hountondji (1983: 60) calls the "myth of primitive unanimity" the false impression that everyone agrees with everyone else in an African community or society. The second implication is related to the first, namely, that the individual cannot critically question the wisdoms of the community nor philosophically systematize these wisdoms in the way Western philosophers like Hegel and Kant would do. If 'philosophy,' in this sense, is no more than a collective worldview, then the task of ethnophilosophy is akin to that of an ethnographer/ethnologist, who merely reports beliefs and practices of supposedly 'primitive' societies, with little or no critical rigor deserving of philosophy.

It is germane to mention at this juncture that Henry Odera Oruka's "sage philosophy" may be considered an attempt to address this problem of collectivism and the assumption of "primitive unanimity". Oruka holds that African communities have "sages," exceptionally gifted individuals who, perhaps with the benefits of age and experience, are able to elaborate community's worldviews and customs, critically engaging them in a manner that might be truly called philosophy. Oruka actually embarked on a project of interviewing such 'Socratic' figures among his Luo people of Kenya and has indeed harvested a body of knowledge that converged into his "sage philosophy" (Oruka 1990, 1998).

It is not within the purview of this paper to render an elaborate critique of Oruka. Scholars like Kalumba (2002) and Ochieng (2008) have done so. For our purposes, it suffices to point out that "sage philosophy" still does not address the problem of collective worldview raised by Hountondji. Besides the minor issues regarding translation and interpretation when eliciting information from local "sages," there is this major issue that such sages may, at bottom, be regurgitating the collective wisdoms of the community inadvertently – perhaps with a few critical and reflective footnotes. For all his/her intellectual prowess, the "sage" is still a product of the community, and his/her ideas might at best be the product of an unconscious assimilation of the wisdoms of the community. Another issue relevant for this paper is that the "sage" does not possess the requisite training in philosophy that would furnish the right conceptual tools to present their ideas; some of the classical problems and categories that have occupied professional philosophy might be alien to the "sage." Therefore, I think "sage philosophy" may not pass Hountondji's critical litmus test.

The problem of collectivism is intertwined with the problem of *sweeping generalization* – another major shortcoming of ethnophilosophy. Once it is assumed that individuals in Africa are not capable of engaging and questioning community worldviews, then the difference in thought-pattern and belief-system between one African people/society and the other becomes blurred. The entire Africa or large swathes of it is then treated as a small village. It is instructive that Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, the work that Hountondji engages the most, lumps together the entire Bantu people, cutting across the better part of sub-Saharan Africa, under one 'philosophy.' But, even if the Belgian missionary-turned-philosopher may be excused for being a foreigner, Hountondji regrets that African scholars themselves are as guilty as foreign scholars in this respect. Hence, he berates William Abrahams' *The Mind of Africa*, J.S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* and all such works that create the impression that Africa has one "mind," one "philosophy" (Hountondji 1983: 59). Following Hountondji, I observe in this regard that Mbiti's work is titled "African religions and philosophy." It is telling that Mbiti

pluralizes “religions” but uses “philosophy” in the singular. Even though Mbiti's work has become something of a 'classic,' I think that work is at the same time a classic case of ethnophilosophy; it is a rather eclectic piece of writing that makes sweeping generalizations about cultural practices and beliefs of African peoples.

But where is this propensity for collectivism derived from; what informs the inclination to sweeping generalizations about Africa and its peoples? An attempt to address these questions most assuredly leads us straight to what Hountondji takes to be the metaphysical underpinnings of ethnophilosophy. This is yet another feature of ethnophilosophy that Hountondji denounces.

On this note, Hountondji thinks that ethnophilosophers operate with a false idea of an "immutable" metaphysical substratum – as it were, the 'mind' of Africa – to which all Africa or huge parts of it consciously or unconsciously subscribe to. For instance, the idea of "Bantu philosophy" presupposes "an immutable, collective philosophy conceived as the ultimate basis of Bantu institutions and culture, recognized consciously by every Bantu" (Hountondji 1983: 39). As metaphysical substratum, this 'mind' of Africa is abstracted from history, change and progress; it is immune to the vagaries of past, present, and future. This is why such works – true to their intent – usually bear the name of "African metaphysics" or "African ontology." Since this 'mind' is supposedly immutable, all philosophizing becomes a frantic search for the 'mind,' a search that mostly entails a retreat into the past: "Each and every African philosopher now feels duty-bound to reconstruct the thought of his forefathers, the collective *Weltanschauung* of his people. To do so, he feels obliged to make himself an ethnological expert on African customs" (Hountondji 1983: 52).

In turn, the false assumption that African cultural resources are immutable explains the habit of romanticizing about the past. I should note here that this is the most common charge leveled against the negritude movement of Césaire and Senghor, whose writings Hountondji – quite predictably – adjudged ethnophilosophical. In the quest for a "solid bedrock" of "certitudes" that the past readily offers, "we find the same preoccupation as in the negritude movement – a passionate search for identity that was denied by the colonizer – but now there is the underlying idea that one of the elements of the cultural identity is precisely 'philosophy,' the idea that every culture rests on a specific, permanent, metaphysical substratum" (Hountondji 1983: 59-60). In the above passage, there is a guiding thread that connects the quest for metaphysical certitude (as a hallmark of ethnophilosophy) and the frenzied search for cultural identity, an identity that the negritude scholars mistake for philosophy. In the same vein, I believe Hountondji would not hesitate to brand Julius Nyerere's "Ujamaa Socialism" a species of ethnophilosophy. Nyerere's (1968, 1987) "Ujamaa Socialism" may also possess trappings of

ethnophilosophy, insofar as it urges Africans to reconstitute the "former attitude of the mind." Nyerere assumes an idyllic African past when the corruption and greed of modernity had not supposedly crept in. To be sure, the past could be very relevant for philosophy, for the thought-patterns that it embodies could be painstakingly rendered relevant for the present and the future. But regarding the 'truths' of the past as immutable truths could stand in the way of making the past relevant for the present and the future.

The point about the practical relevance of philosophy ties into another trait of the ethnophilosophical method that Hountondji finds frustrating, namely its apparent *lack of sociopolitical relevance* for Africa. The reason is not far-fetched. The factors enumerated above undermine the capacity of ethnophilosophy to speak to current sociopolitical issues affecting Africa. But Hountondji believes that any African philosophy worth the name must primarily face African audience not Western audience; it must address Africa's sociopolitical issues; it may even lay the foundation for scientific progress and development. Hence, he speaks of the "genuine scientific movement" (Hountondji 1983: 45) that should be the fruit of philosophical discourse in Africa and insists that African philosophers "cannot afford the luxury of self-satisfied apoliticism or quiescent complacency about the established disorder unless they deny themselves both as philosophers and as people" (Hountondji 1983: 46).

I observe that Hountondji may have exaggerated the point about the practical relevance of philosophy, since he sometimes sees relevance in terms of 'palpable' scientific progress. To be sure, there is more to the relevance of philosophy than scientific progress. I do not subscribe to this narrow understanding of the societal relevance of philosophy. There is no doubt that philosophy (and African philosophy in particular) is of practical importance to society. But this should not be conceived mainly in terms of ostensible scientific progress. Having said that, I agree with Hountondji that the features and traits outlined above stifle ethnophilosophy's capacity to make great practical impact on society.

I end this section by acknowledging that a panoply of scholarship has been produced by African scholars with an admirable level of philosophical rigor and systemization worthy of the name philosophy. These philosophical writings have explored such areas as logic, language, and even metaphysics, mostly relying on African philosophical resources and connecting them up with the most important issues that attend philosophy as a global field of enquiry. They have carried out philosophical reflections on the concepts of truth, logic, democracy, freedom, community, etc. with remarkable aplomb and in ways that cannot be called ethnophilosophy.

Yet there is still a need to explore different frameworks that could remedy the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy in order consolidate the gains already made in the field of

African philosophy. As I earlier proposed, the notion of "social imaginaries" holds out a great promise in this respect.

In what follows, I briefly explore this notion in preparation for the final task. I draw largely on Charles Taylor but will also make relevant allusions to Jürgen Habermas and other thinkers.

2. "Social imaginaries": A Basic Understanding

Charles Taylor uses the term "social imaginary" to describe the ways the *ordinary*, 'folk' people imagine and make sense of their lives and social existence. It embodies their *ordinary* beliefs and knowledges of "how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2004: 23). It goes without saying that, at any given historical period in its evolution, there are *normal* expectations or vision a society has of itself as an entity; there are ordinary expectations members have of one another, how individuals and groups should relate among themselves, what is normally acceptable and what is not, what would count as authentic, responsible, and fulfilling life – in short, how life, generally conceived, should be lived. All these go into what Taylor refers to as the social imaginary/imaginaries of such a society. The stress on "ordinary" and "normal" serves to make the point that social imaginaries are not for the elite alone. They are a "repertory" of largely non-theoretical (sometimes pre-theoretical or post-theoretical), "implicit" background understandings and knowledges that inform social practices (Taylor 2004: 25).

Yet they are powerful and significant resources that exert great influence on the way people live in society. They are cultural notions that guide people's actions, even though people may not always produce a clear description of the background behind their actions. In this sense, social imaginaries are not mere figments of the imagination. Indeed, they are undeniably real, if we understand this in terms of the sheer force or impact imaginaries exerts on society. Contrary to what the term might suggests at first sight, imaginaries are a force that "carries the heaviest weight in the determination of conduct and collective orientation" (Eze 1997: 343) and must be accorded the seriousness they deserve in any philosophical analysis.

By way of underlining the 'ordinariness' of social imaginaries, Taylor tries to distinguish it from *social theories*. While a 'theory' may be a possession of a small elitist group, an 'imaginary' is shared by the common folk, "large groups of people, if not the whole society." In other words, an imaginary is non-elitist and democratized. This is so given the nature of the knowledge that is involved: while the knowledge involved in a theory is somewhat specialized,

rarified, elitist and requires clear articulation, an imaginary is "often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends." (Taylor 2004: 23). It is "vulgar," "plebian" knowledge, the kind Boaventura De Sousa Santos refers to as "lived knowledges" (Sousa Santos 2014: 158-159). Yet such knowledges are the ones that inform life as ordinarily lived in society. For a theory to drive people's day-to-day lives, it must first transform itself into a social imaginary, shed off its elitist character and become a taken-for-granted piece of knowledge – and then take a firm hold of ordinary people (Taylor 2004: 29).

For the sake of elaboration, it is not out of place to briefly point out the striking similarity between Taylor's "social imaginaries" and Habermas's notion of the "lifeworld" – more precisely the "culture" component of the lifeworld (Habermas 1987: 138). Social imaginaries and the lifeworld are cognate notions to the extent that Habermas (1987: 137, 121-130) likewise describes the lifeworld as "background knowledge," "stock of knowledge," "implicit assumptions" "reservoir of taken-for-granteds" that underlie *communicative action*. Communicative actions are actions oriented towards mutual understanding, and participants in communicative action must draw from this background, implicit, common stock of knowledge – the lifeworld. In other words, communicative interaction among persons in society is only made possible in and through the lifeworld. The relationship between social imaginaries and the lifeworld may be further illuminated in E. C. Eze's (1997: 343) submissions:

> The notion of "social imaginary" nearly coincides, in form and function, with the "worldview." It is the prethematic plane that makes possible (i.e., enables, structures, and constrains) actual social and cultural practices and knowledges. It is part and parcel of the horizon of the lifeworld, in and through which reality occurs to us as objects of value and/or knowledge. It is a zone charged with the energy of myth and utopia ...it is the field of the imaginary representations that carries the heaviest weight in the determination of conduct and collective orientation.

Eze's submissions not only link social imaginaries with the lifeworld, but also carry most of Taylor's insights on social imaginaries I have already tried to enunciate.

An important point that I find useful for the next section is that social imaginaries (as well as lifeworld) are never static but change over time. The change that occurs at the sphere of the imaginary may be slow and hardly perceptible, usually influenced by new knowledges, information and social experiences that come up to challenge older ones. In fact, Taylor's work, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004), is a detailed account of the transformation in the social

imaginaries of the West that may rightly be called "modern," as distinguished from the imaginaries that prevailed in antiquity up to the medieval times.

For instance, Taylor accounts for how it came to be that the language of rights, radical equality and individualism came to form part of the social imaginaries of modern Western society. For Taylor, it is all associated with a shift in society's self-understanding and perception of social relations, whereby the premodern idea of "hierarchical complementarity" that regards some humans (like priests and monarchs) as 'natural superiors' to the common folk, gave way to a notion of social relations that stresses radical equality and individual rights. Social status is thereby viewed as contingent rather than something that presumably belongs to the ontological 'order of things' (Taylor 2004: 11, 18, 64-65; see also Taylor: 1991: 31).

Similarly, secularism as an important feature of Western modernity became so, thanks to a gradual shift from an imaginary that prioritized God (or other 'higher forces') and the human representatives of religion to one that reduces religion to the status of one among many options. This is such that belief now becomes a matter of individual choice (Taylor 2004: 157, 187, 194; 2007: 3). This belongs to the wider process of what Taylor calls the "great disembedding," a process whereby society gradually disentangles itself from its traditional 'anchors' (Taylor 2004: 49-67), a process that Marcel Gauchet (1997) famously refers to as the "disenchantment of the world." In the same vein, shift in social imaginaries accounts for the fact that *democracy* (and later representative, constitutional democracy) gradually became *the* acceptable mode of expressing 'popular sovereignty,' effectively displacing monarchy and all forms of government that may be rightly termed 'premodern' (Taylor 2004: 109-141; also see Wallerstein 2011: 11).

It cannot be gainsaid that elements of modern Western social imaginaries – namely, rights, radical equality, individualism, secularism, popular sovereignty expressed as democracy, etc. – are at the same time the key features of Western modernity as such. What manifested as concrete sociopolitical forms first took shape on the realm of the imaginaries. This reinforces the point that social imaginaries inform actual societal practices, and therefore constitutes an important site for philosophizing.

Having presented the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy (i.e., the descriptive type critiqued by Hountondji and others) and provided an essential understanding of the idea of social imaginaries, the ground is now prepared well enough for the task of using the latter to remedy these shortcomings.

3. How the Idea of "Social Imaginaries" may remedy the Ethnophilosophy Problem

As earlier stated, I have set out to make the case that engaging Africa's cultural and epistemic resources (such as thought-patterns, cultural knowledges, etc.) as social imaginaries could remedy the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy.

Before I proceed, I make these two clarifications. First, I have not set out to offhandedly dismiss African metaphysics or ontology as possible frameworks within which African philosophy could be done. To be sure, metaphysics and ontology have their places in African philosophy. However, problem arises when, rather than engage the vast gamut of epistemic resources as social imaginaries, they get essentialized or ontologized. Second, I have not set out to present an elaborate systematic discourse on how to establish African philosophy on the framework of social imaginaries. Even if there may be allusions in this direction, my rather *modest* focus – as the very title of the article suggests – is to show how the social imaginaries framework might remedy the cluster of pitfalls associated with ethnophilosophy. Having said that, I now begin to address the issues.

Among the key problems of ethnophilosophy, as seen from Hountondji's critique, is the assumption of a metaphysical 'substratum,' the 'mind' of Africa, as it were. In fact, the other weaknesses of ethnophilosophy are somewhat traceable to this singular assumption. All writings that provide a classic case of ethnophilosophy operate with this false assumption. As I see it, what is at play in such writings is that the cultural and epistemic resources expressed thereof are indeed treated as 'metaphysics' or 'ontology.' When treated as such, local philosophical resources put on a bogus cloak of immutability. They become static, essentialized, hypostasized.

Admittedly, a number of recent writings in African philosophy (including metaphysics) make no such pretensions to immutability. However, since the tendency described above still hovers like a specter in African philosophy, as I metaphorically referred to it earlier, we must continue to 'exorcise' it for the overall benefit of the philosophy enterprise in Africa. I submit, therefore, that the social imaginary framework could be useful in this respect.

Now, from the features of social imaginaries provided earlier, there are no such pretensions to eternal validity. Taylor and Habermas (the latter on the cognate notion of the "lifeworld") have made it clear that social imaginaries do change over time. Change is the only permanent feature of existence. As Heraclitus of old affirms, change is the only thing that is constant. Therefore, to cast the thought-patterns and knowledges of African peoples as

immutable may be considered a grave intellectual offence to the extent that it denies them and their possessors this basic fact of existence – change.

When Taylor presents such features of "modern" Western social imaginaries as rights, individualism, secularism, capitalist culture, popular sovereignty, etc., he is also careful to juxtapose them with social visions/imaginaries of earlier epochs. He even cautions that we moderns should not assume that things have always been like this. Rather, they are a product of a "long march." The freedoms that we enjoy now might be considered "a luxury, a dangerous indulgence" by our forebears (Taylor 2004: 17). Similarly, African peoples and communities from time immemorial have continued to adapt their visions of society and life in general, subject to new knowledges and experiences. For instance, the Igbo historian, J.N. Oriji furnishes an interesting account of the socio-political transformations of the Igbo society since the "late Stone Age" (Oriji 2011), transformations that no doubt occurred first at the sphere of Igbo imaginaries. If it has been established that the Igbo – or any other (African) people for that matter – have continued to review their thoughts about life and society over time, which in turn reflects in actual socio-political practices, would it then not be a gross misrepresentation to present these thoughts as static and immutable?

In light of the above, I propose that scholars who wish to overcome the spell of essentialization must treat cultural knowledges and social visions that go into the making of African philosophy as social imaginaries. More often than not, they will have to give up the language of 'metaphysics' or 'ontology' and adopt the framework of social imaginaries. Social imaginaries, embodying thought-patterns that inform social practices, belong to the sphere of "lived knowledges," as Sousa Santos calls them. By adopting social imaginaries as a philosophical idiom or 'currency,' they would not only overcome the tendency to hypostasize these thought-patterns, but they would also be rendering them more philosophically useful, as I shall demonstrate.

The next issue I wish to address is the problem of collectivization of thought. A major question posed against the ethnophilosophy method is the question of "who speaks for the community/people?" It should be recalled that it was the frantic attempt to answer this question that led Oruka to seek out the so-called "sages," who could supposedly synthesize the 'mind' of the people and are able to even add some critical footnotes. But it has been argued that the "sage" at best regurgitates collective thoughts (even with the critical notes and personal reflections); moreover, the sage lacks the critical-analytic tools that formal philosophical training bestows.

Now, with the social imaginaries framework, it becomes possible to remedy the challenge of 'who-speaks-for-the-community?' This is so because social imaginaries (unlike supposed metaphysical substratum) are characteristically accessible insofar as they disclose themselves in language and in concrete social institutions and practices of a people. In this respect, what it takes to gain access to the social imaginary of a people is to be *hermeneutically immersed* in the culture. By 'hermeneutic immersion,' I mean that one is socialized in a culture in a manner that at least generates a sort of first-hand understanding of the social imaginaries thereof. The individual could at least make sense of the meaning-system behind social practices.

It should be noted, however, that it takes *much more* than a hermeneutic immersion to be able to *philosophically disclose* social imaginaries. Indeed, one requires a set of *analytic-hermeneutical* tools to be able to philosophically engage the materials. In other words, not everybody *hermeneutically* immersed in a culture is able to *philosophically* disclose and articulate its social imaginaries. "Sage philosophy" has been discredited precisely because the "sages" lack the analytic dimension despite possessing the hermeneutic dimension. This example suffices to drive my point home: Charles Taylor writes about "Western" social imaginaries, not by mere fact of being born in the West nor yet of being hermeneutically immersed in Western culture but because he also has certain set of analytic-hermeneutic tools at his disposal, acquired through some 'formal' engagement in the discipline of philosophy.

From this standpoint, therefore, the authority the African 'professional' philosopher possesses to philosophically articulate or disclose the social imaginaries of a given culture is derived not only from a hermeneutic immersion of being socialized in such a culture, but crucially from an analytic-hermeneutic skill bestowed by 'formal' engagement with philosophy. Some writings exist today that may be properly called African philosophy. They are able to engage wider philosophical issues while at the same time rooted in African imaginaries. They address question of being, time, death, truth, meaning, democracy, governance, etc., armed with the analytic-hermeneutic tools that the Oruka's "sage" lacks.

Let me now address the other component of the question of "who speaks for the community/people?" which directly touches upon the charge of "primitive unanimity" leveled against ethnophilosophy. By treating community cultural knowledges and thought-patterns as social imaginaries, it becomes possible to sidestep and overcome the statistical challenges that attend ethnographical and anthropological research. Let me explain. Ethnographers, anthropologists, and sociologists sometimes interview individual members of the community about their personal views, a method that helps them arrive at a type of 'collective mind,' as they see it. Ethnophilosophy and sage philosophy, insofar as they sometimes venture into such

statistical exercises, lack a self-understanding that separates philosophy from ethnography and anthropology. Such ethnographical or anthropological studies may only present facts and not the underlying meaning-system which explains these facts. But the sphere of the imaginaries is the sphere of philosophy, in that they find expression in language and social practices. Language is a social property. Imaginaries furnish the analytic-hermeneutic leverage to philosophically disclose the underlying meaning system behind language and social practices.

From the methodological standpoint of social imaginaries, the hunt for statistical data therefore becomes quite unnecessary. The character of social imaginaries, as earlier outlined, renders statistical research redundant. As Taylor maintains, social imaginary "incorporates a sense of *the normal expectations* we have of each other" (Taylor 2004: 24; my italics). In other words, what matters more is that each society has normal expectations, sometimes unexpressed, for social life. Individual differences and eccentricities are accommodated, so long as they are not such that call into question one's very maturity as a human person and member of the society. The fact that society goes into the making of the self drastically minimizes fringe behaviors. Many writings, including those of Taylor and Habermas, have drawn attention to the inextricable role of the *social* in the making of the *self*. For example, Habermas (1996: 151, 177, 179) speaks of "individuation through socialization;" G.H. Mead speaks of 'sociogenesis,' that is, the "internalization of social control" by which the "generalized other" as "behavioral expectations" goes into the making of the self (Mead 1981: 142, 146, 284). In turn, what count as Taylor's (1989) "sources of the self" essentially belong to the social.

The point I am trying to drive home is that the sphere of the imaginary makes philosophical analysis possible by placing enquiry on the socio-epistemic domain, facilitated by language and social practices. As a result, the problem of "primitive unanimity," to use Hountondji's terms – i.e., the false assumption that everyone in African communities agrees with everyone else and commits in the same degree to a given set of beliefs – is remedied. It goes without saying that people in Western societies do not commit in the exact same degree to their imaginaries. Yet it is possible to talk of "Western" social imaginaries because they are indeed recognizable. Why then would it be supposed that everyone must agree with everyone else in an Africa society for us to validly speak of Igbo social imaginaries or Yoruba social imaginaries? Therefore, the social imaginaries of African societies, insofar as they are not some metaphysical 'substratum,' are identifiable and could be treated philosophically with the right analytic-hermeneutical tools.

At this juncture, let's speak to the question of 'usefulness' since one of the problems of ethnophilosophy verges on usefulness. I propose right away that the framework of social

imaginaries significantly increases the potential 'usefulness' of Africa's philosophical resources. Here, it may be helpful to recall that a major frustration Hountondji expresses vis-a-vis the ethnophilosophy framework is its apparent lack of political potential – what he refers to as "self-satisfied apoliticism or quiescent complacency" (Hountondji 1983: 46). Though Hountondji seems to be focusing on 'political' relevance and sometimes on scientific, I believe the issue borders on overall capacity to address Africa's many challenges. Matolino (2019: 115–116), following Hountondji, also expresses doubts about the capacity of ethnophilosophy to contribute to a "rapidly changing African personae and environment" on grounds that "ethnophilosophy essentializes who and what the African standpoint is." Several other attributes of ethnophilosophy combine to undermine its capacity to speak to Africa's problems.

In what follows, I show how the social imaginaries framework indeed addresses the question of usefulness, connecting it with the problem of *generalization* and *romanticization* of Africa's past.

First, since the social imaginaries framework, as I have shown, overcomes the 'metaphysical' deadweight that defines ethnophilosophy (i.e., the descriptive type), it, ipso facto, overcomes the default apologetic attitude of 'facing the West.' If that sickening need to explain Africa to the West has been overcome, it now becomes possible for African philosophers to analyze African imaginaries with the aim of incorporating them in Africa's modernization to address current sociopolitical challenges.

Second, the social imaginary framework reins in on the propensity for generalization, given that it pays attention to the nuances in each culture and does not operate with the metaphysical underpinnings that lead to generalizations about Africa. Such metaphysical underpinnings are embodied in the myth of the "Mind of Africa," as seen in the title of William Abraham's (1962) work, one of such ethnophilosophical writings. In turn, the link between the propensity for generalization and lack of sociopolitical relevance is that generalization condemns the ethnophilosopher to a mere descriptive, eclectic approach, an approach that, as Hountondji puts it, undermines the sense of urgency to address Africa's current issues. For whatever merits it might have, whoever picks up J.S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1970) will notice this descriptiveness and the apparent lack of the sense of sociopolitical urgency. Admittedly, the social imaginary framework is not meant to *primarily* serve as a political manifesto of sorts. But, free from metaphysical deadweights, it could potentially open some new path, some new vision, some new horizon. Since it draws on the Africa's epistemic resources, the framework may then freely immerse itself in emancipatory discourses and the

politics of knowledge and knowledge-production already championed by counterparts in Latin America (Dussel 1985, 1995; Mignolo 2000, 2011; Quijano 2000, 2007).

Furthermore, since the social imaginaries framework denies the existence of the supposed 'mind' of Africa, it ipso facto rejects homogenizing claims about Africa, the type that create the wrong impression that an entire continent was like a village. Recognizing that there could exist similarities, but more importantly *differences*, in the social imaginaries of various African peoples helps to focus the philosophical radar on specific communities and peoples with unifying languages (since imaginaries find expression in language) rather than the entire Africa or large geopolitical or multilingual entities within Africa. Again, this is not to deny the existence of cultural similarities between African peoples. But I think it is scholarly 'safer,' more credible and more 'useful' to make claims about a specific people/culture than to make claims about, say, the whole of Africa or large parts of it, as Mbiti (1970) does.

Third – and finally – the framework of social imaginaries could attenuate the tendency to romanticize about and canonize a supposedly 'idyllic' African past, making an implicit call for a return to a presumably idyllic past. As was earlier noted, this propensity is present in Senghor's "negritude;" it is also identifiable in Nyerere's "ujamaa socialism." Consequently, both have been considered an exercise in ethnophilosophy. But engaging cultural and epistemic resources as social imaginaries is a recognition of their non-static, fluid character and a clear invitation to a forward-looking philosophical disposition. If the ethnophilosophical method idolizes an 'idyllic' past, the framework I propose, on the contrary, puts Africa's philosophical resources in the service of the present and the future. African philosophy thus becomes a forward-looking exercise that contributes to the wider process of Africa's modernization, and not a backward-looking search for some 'relic' of the past.

Conclusion

In the foregoing discourse, I have tried to make the case that engaging African philosophical resources, i.e., cultural knowledges and epistemic resources, as social imaginaries could help overcome the shortcomings identified in ethnophilosophy. The grounds for my argument could be summarized as follows. Unlike ethnophilosophy, the framework of social imaginaries does not hypostatize socio-cultural knowledges and epistemic resources. It does not lend itself to sweeping generalizations about Africa. The framework of social imaginaries remedies the problem of collectivism, that is, the problem of 'who-speaks-for-the-community?' It does not indulge in idle romanticization and canonization of a supposedly 'better' past, a disposition that militates against realistic and forward-looking philosophizing. With the framework of social

imaginaries, Africa's indigenous cultural and epistemic resources acquire the capacity to be analyzed philosophically. This, in turn, enhances their potential for addressing current sociopolitical issues affecting Africa.

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