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REVIEW

***African Philosophy: Emancipation and Practice*, by Pascah Mungwini. Bloomsbury 2022. 218 pages. (Hardback ISBN 978-1-3501-9649-0); (Paperback ISBN 978-1-3501-9650-6)**

Lloyd Strickland*

Department of History, Politics and Philosophy, Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author. Email: lstrickland@mmu.ac.uk

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Bloomsbury's 'Introductions to World Philosophies' is a new book series which seeks to give a platform to philosophies and philosophical traditions often ignored or marginalized in the west. In comparison with some other titles in the series, such as Georgina Tuari Stewart's *Maori philosophy* (2020) and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair's *Sikh Philosophy* (2022), both of which offer short introductions to key philosophical ideas, Mungwini's *African Philosophy* is less a primer than it is a manifesto for what he calls 'the emancipative mission' (1). This mission involves not just liberating African philosophy from western hegemony but also engaging in self-(re)discovery, whereby philosophy in Africa seeks 'to establish its own identity and priority questions in response to the specificities of the continent and the needs of its peoples' (2).

The first of the book's five chapters opens by mapping the terrain of African philosophy past and present, focusing in particular on the debate surrounding ethnophilosophy, that is, the recovery and reconstruction of an indigenous philosophy from traditional orature. In the late 1960s, Paulin Hountondji famously railed against such ethnological work, in particular as exemplified in the (in)famous book *Bantu Philosophy* written in the mid-1940s by the Belgian Franciscan missionary Placide Tempels. In his critique, Hountondji charged that Tempels' work committed the sins of unanimism (i.e., giving the impression that there was an immutable collective philosophy common to all Africans) and extraversion (i.e., being written for a non-African audience: Tempels actually wrote his book for fellow missionaries to assist their efforts in what was at the time known as the Belgian Congo, now the Democrat Republic of the Congo). So successful was Hountondji's critique that an anti-ethnophilosophy crusade ensued, such that even for many of today's African philosophers, 'any attempt to engage with communal philosophies or particularistic studies of the philosophy of various ethnic cultures is a mortal sin' (26). Mungwini takes exception to what he calls

‘the unrestrained bashing of ethnophilosophy’ (30), considering it as excessive and indeed counter-productive, in that it has inhibited the development of an authentically African philosophy by keeping many of its practitioners in thrall to the western paradigm of what philosophy is and how it should be done. On the matter of identity, Mungwini plausibly suggests that ‘what distinguishes the field as African philosophy are the cultural traditions it draws from’ (39).

Developing this point, chapter 2 issues a call for self-apprehension: African philosophers need to understand themselves, their history, and intellectual heritage. Accordingly, so far from maligning communal philosophy or particularistic studies of the philosophies of various ethnic groups, Mungwini urges that ‘African philosophy should have within its purview’ (53) precisely such studies in order to meet the injunction ‘African know thyself’. Of course, one of the best ways to show the value of such particularistic studies is to engage in them successfully while avoiding the sort of pitfalls identified by Hountondji, and indeed Mungwini here mentions the obvious example of Kwasi Wiredu’s work on Akan philosophy. But perhaps out of an abundance of modesty he says nothing about his own previous book, *Indigenous Shona Philosophy: Reconstructive Insights* (UNISA Press, 2017), which is every bit the equal of Wiredu’s work and a model of how African philosophers can mine the philosophical resources of their own culture without committing the sins of unanimism or extraversion. Indeed, if Mungwini had offered a set of principles here for how to undertake particularistic studies with sensitivity and philosophical rigor, it would not have been out of place.

Having made his case for African philosophers to redraw the parameters of philosophy by making use of their own cultural resources, Mungwini turns to the future of philosophy, both African and global. In chapter 4 he urges African philosophers to make Africa ‘the focus of their attention in both theory and practice’ (110), in order to undercut any concerns of extraversion and to achieve the conceptual decolonization project that began with the ‘Rhodes must fall’ movement. Yet in his desire to place African problems and African solutions at the heart of African philosophy, Mungwini does not depart from his oft-stated view that philosophy is a universal practice, as is clear from chapter 3, which calls for African philosophers to engage in intercultural dialogue. Envisaged here is not an exchange of abstract ideas developed in response to the sort of theoretical problems with which western philosophy is so often preoccupied, but rather a collaborative endeavor with a more practical upshot. Indeed, Mungwini is aware that the best philosophy is relevant to the practical concerns of life, suggesting that a dialogue between cultures should once again place ‘philosophy in the service of humanity’ (132).

The final chapter pursues the idea of intercultural dialogue to sketch out a positive and inclusive vision for philosophy across the globe, where the different philosophies of the world meet, like individual streams and rivers pooling into one huge ocean. Mungwini supposes that among Africa’s contributions to this great confluence of ideas will be the tradition of Ubuntu, or ‘human(e)ness’, which stresses the interdependence of human beings, the importance of developing virtues that contribute to the well-being of the community, and the moderation of self-interest in favor of communal harmony. Whereas western ethical frameworks such as utilitarianism and deontology are typically treated in the abstract through theoretical examples and thought experiments, Ubuntu—as Mungwini stresses—is a lived and living philosophy (164). To western minds, the most well-known example of Ubuntu in practice is probably as the guiding philosophical principle behind South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation commission set up at the end of Apartheid. Mungwini, however, does not mention that, instead turning to ‘such postcolonial leaders as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Sékou Touré of Guinea, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia’ (156), all of whom sought to rebuild their societies after independence by drawing upon their own African cultural traditions, in particular Ubuntu. Those of us who despair of the societal damage caused by the self-interest and pursuit of wealth that dominates in the west should welcome the prospect of greater engagement with Ubuntu, the jewel in Africa’s philosophical crown.

Ever positive and forward-looking, Mungwini's book offers us a framework for what philosophy could and should be, both in Africa and the wider world. As such, it makes for compelling reading not just for African philosophers and students of African philosophy, but for western philosophers too, even those who have heretofore ignored African philosophy. For if philosophy in the west is to throw off its insularity, its unjustifiable claims to universality, and its unwarranted but deep-rooted sense of superiority—in short, if it is to remain relevant as a discipline in an increasingly globalized world—then it will need to engage with the sorts of ideas Mungwini offers here and be open to dialogue with African philosophers (*inter alia*) in the pursuit of answers not to the theoretical questions that matter only in the classroom but to the pressing practical problems that affect us all.