

IN MEMORIAM

## Remembering Paulin Hountondji: The Zairian Interlude

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### Hountondji, the scholar

The announcement of Paulin Hountondji's departure to the land of the Ancestors was publicized in the African, French, and other international media, all praising this eminent African philosopher and remembering his remarkable contribution to the recognition of an African philosophy. All, rightly so, emphasized how he gave *lettres de noblesse* to African philosophy as an academic discipline.

Back in 1964–65, I was a second-year student at the University Lovanium in Kinshasa. Franz Crahay, a Belgian professor in the Philosophy Department at that same university gave a talk at the Kinshasa Goethe Institute. That talk had long repercussions and brought many discussions: it was, among other things, about an African philosophy, something never heard about before. As I recall it, taking a position different from the Belgian Catholic priest Placide Tempels in his *Philosophie bantoue*,<sup>1</sup> Crahay, somehow, was contesting the homogenization of African traditions, emphasizing instead their diversity. Then came out Paulin Hountondji's seminal book *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*—a truly revolutionary endeavor. To recall it briefly, in this book Hountondji takes African philosophy out of the reductive uniform anthropological form popularized by the work of Tempels: a form that Hountondji labels “ethnophilosophy” and against which he writes forcefully. He opens the doors to a wide debate on African philosophy, which for him is not a collective thought embedded in the narrative of myths, beliefs and traditions translating a worldview, but is rather exercised as a reflection and critical discourse that should stand at a global scale by keeping the universal meaning of what is philosophy. In his other books, Hountondji argues—among other topics—for a collection and a reappropriation of what he calls *savoirs endogènes*, which should be excavated and examined to know how to use these *savoirs* in today's world. All that has been written to remember this great African philosopher focuses on Hountondji's intellectual contribution to the field of African philosophy, his academic brilliance, his

unique and remarkable contribution to African philosophy and knowledge of Africa.

### Paulin Hountondji, our friend

Without dismissing the well-deserved tributes to Hountondji's career and academic contribution and legacy, I would like to bring my personal memory of him, the human face behind the public figure of the great intellectual that he was. Paulin was indeed not only a humanist, a great mind, and a brilliant scholar. He was equally a person of charm, grace, and great humility, despite his eminent position and international recognition in the academic world. My first encounter with Paulin Hountondji goes back to the first semester of the academic year 1970–71 at the Université Lovanium in Kinshasa. While sitting in my office at the Celria,<sup>2</sup> I saw him enter the room. He did not introduce himself but went straight to the point: he was looking for information and books by African theologians and “philosophers.” I was able to provide some books, among which was the book of a Congolese theologian priest, Father Lufuluabo. At this first encounter, I found Hountondji condescending and pedantic—or so, at least, was my perception. The reason was that he was speaking in a slow rhythm, articulating his words almost like having to spell them out, as if I was not smart enough to understand what he wanted.

The first semester of that 1970–71 academic year at the Université Lovanium was a troubled period. Students were holding protests on Campus.<sup>3</sup> As a punishment, the political power of the time decided to shut the university, and students were forced to go to the military. Some schools at the Université Lovanium, such as the Sciences Sociales and the Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, were deemed troublemakers, and were removed from the capital Kinshasa and sent to the provinces. In addition, all universities were nationalized and put under the unique denomination of University Nationale du Zaïre (UNAZA), with campuses in different cities. The Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres and the Sciences Sociales were transferred to the city of Lubumbashi in the southeast of the country. Hountondji's spouse, Grâce (we used to call her “Madame Grâce”) followed him to Lubumbashi and worked as an English teacher in a local secondary school. Paulin himself continued his teaching in the Philosophy Department, with colleagues such as Jean Kinyongo, the Catholic priests Father Van Parijs, Father Smets, and others.

At UNAZA Lubumbashi, Paulin became part of a small, very solidary, group of friends and colleagues—all from Université Lovanium—who proudly considered themselves as *intellectuels de gauche* (leftist intellectuals), which they truly were: the Belgian Jean-Claude Willame, the Swiss Laurent Monnier (now deceased), and the Congolese (Zairian in those days<sup>4</sup>) Valentin Mudimbe. They would regularly meet at our home for dinner and endless discussions about Marxism, psychoanalysis, the function of the university, the role of the intellectuals and so on. That was when I realized that Paulin was in fact a heavy stutterer, and that what I thought was condescendence was only his way of speaking. In fact, despite his diplomas from prestigious academic institutions and his stature in the global academic world, Paulin was genuinely an unassuming person, loving life, always in a good

mood, sometimes playful and teasing, and often exercising self-irony, among other things, about his stuttering. He told us, for example, how—during his years in Paris—he underwent psychoanalysis, hoping that it would help him to stop stuttering. He called it “*une psychanalyse inutile*” (a useless psychoanalysis). I do not know how truly it has been “*une psychanalyse inutile*” as he used to say it. Actually, in public speeches, giving lectures or conference talks in French, Paulin’s stuttering could be almost imperceptible to those who did not know him: as it was when I met him for the first time. It was only in private circles and with close friends that he would speak with a stutter. We, his friends, would often tease him about that, and he would respond with a big laugh, saying that with friends he did not need to try to control his rhythm of speech.

Those first years in Lubumbashi were good years: besides the academic life, there were plenty of laughs, dinners, parties, and most importantly, friendship. Then came the first “*guerre du Shaba*” (the Shaba war), followed by months of curfew. The Zairian government did not pay salaries to foreign faculty with local contracts so the expatriate colleagues started leaving the university, going back to their home countries where they continued with their teaching: Laurent Monnier went back to Switzerland, Jean-Claude Willame to Belgian, and Paulin Hountondji went to Bénin.

To use an oxymoron, Paulin Hountondji has been a quiet revolutionary. Although gone now to the land of the Ancestors, his name and his legacy will remain indelibly linked to the discipline called African Philosophy.

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## Notes

1. Placide Tempels, *Philosophie bantoue* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1949).
2. Centre d’Etude des Littératures Romanes d’Inspiration Africaine. The center was a departmental library and hosted mostly literary works by African and Caribbean francophone writers and authors.
3. See Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), particularly 84–128.
4. In the 1970s, the Democratic Republic of Congo was called Zaire—the name was changed by decision of the political party in power at that time.