


IN MEMORIAM

## Reencuentros with Paulin Hountondji

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### Abstract

These reflections look back on Paulin Hountondji's mentorship, and how he helped a comparatist to bridge Latin American (and Latinx) studies with African studies during fieldwork in Benin.

**Keywords:** identity; south-south; Latin America; oral traditions; Sami Tchak; Mexico; alienation

One of the reasons I am indebted to Paulin Hountondji is for helping a comparatist like me join Latin(x) American and African studies.

I met Paulin Hountondji over a decade ago as a graduate student, and his warm welcome at Cotonou airport that summer remains unforgettable. I had secured funding to do fieldwork along the Slave Route, seeking more than a colonial history as a link to the Americas. My mentor Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi had put us in contact, and I was of course nervous to meet the luminary but he quickly proved disarming. Paulin helped me secure an apartment, transportation to site visits, and informants, all while becoming a close ally. My fondest memories were speaking to him about all things Beninese culture, most often at his office downtown, where he was the president of the National Council for Education (CNE). There, he made several phone calls to put me in touch with interlocutors, making sure I used my time wisely in view of the heavy rains that were making travel to flooded areas around Abomey and Ouidah challenging. As a newcomer to African Studies, seeking to assess the African archive contained in many Latin American and Latinx stories I had found, Paulin did everything he could to turn me into the truly cosmopolitan scholar I aimed to become.

Years later, I reacquainted myself with Paulin through my fieldwork notes. I was writing a chapter for my book about the distortion of vodun in a Latinx literary example and looked back on Paulin's remarks regarding public opinion on his dismissal of the local commodification of this practice at its place of origin

in Ouidah. In his role as president of the provisional international Committee of Coordination of the Slave Route, he'd been criticized for not wanting to incorporate vodun into the aims of the slave trade memory. He considered that marrying religion through the vodun festival termed "Ouidah 92" with the Slave Route project was an invitation to not only conflate vodun practice and the slave trade era distortion of it, but to veer away from the scientific aims of the project of highlighting and valorizing relations between different ethnic Beninese groups (Araujo 2010, 157). These disputes might have unconsciously led to my own formulation in my book that some Latinx or Latin American writers were criticizing theorizations of blackness without "Africa" in Caribbean culture, simply because African agency was rarely considered to be weighing in on its own representation. For example, while much of the referents in Latinx culture about Africa can be traced to the eurocentric representations of explorers like Leo Frobenius and Henry Stanley, it is also true that neoliberal programming in Africa—like the kind that Paulin was challenging—also led to this commodification. The commodification of the slave site of Badagry in Nigeria evoked centrally in a novel by Cuban American Achy Obejas (which the Jackson Five had threatened to convert into a casino and theme park) undoes the endogenous concerns of the site of memory. The commodification of Africa in Latinx or Latin American culture, which I found to be as much a projection of Latin America as one from Africa, stressed Paulin's positionality of intellectual responsibility toward endogenous knowledge; a philosophical concept he hailed later in life.

Moreover, the local and diasporic distortion of traditions like vodun, for me, became rehabilitated when placed next to oral traditions that Paulin brought to my attention. For some, it might still seem ironic that Paulin mentored me on the subject, especially looking back on his critique of ethnophilosophy and the pushback his seminal *African Philosophy* received. This is because Paulin came neither from the traditionalist school of thought that originally hailed oral tradition (Alexis Kagame) nor from the left-leaning nationalists that doubled down on identity politics (Kwame Nkrumah, Gamal Abdel Nasser) but rather liberal modernists who championed science and universality. And yet, Paulin's training of someone like me, a Mexican and American scholar on a quest to understand the local Beninese at Slave Route sites and the folklorizations they produce (or do not produce) about their own culture, challenges these "ethnic" and epistemological expectations of his work. To Paulin, it was imperative I had guides to talk to—anthropologists and ethnographers but also local informants and griots. His positionality, often interpreted as if "'writing' was superior to orality" or the "salvational role then being attributed to 'literacy'" (Ochieng 2010, 33) was not one I encountered in my quest to valorize and interpret oral traditions into Latinx and Latin American literature. On the contrary, Hountondji introduced me to Zphirin Daavo, who worked for the Agence Nationale pour la Promotion des Patrimoines et de développement du tourisme in Benin and had offered me transcriptions of oral traditions told along the UNESCO Slave Route; these transcriptions became a foundation for my book.

When the book was finally published, Paulin invited me to be in conversation with him about it at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi. Because I had to postpone the event, I missed my chance to be in conversation with the legend that helped

shape it. I will always regret this but I remain in awe of the ways in which Paulin continues to transform and inform my own work.

Lately, I have been thinking about frameworks that would enable me to make sense of the alienation felt in African francophone novels set in Latin America that nevertheless desire a connection to these places. In novels such as Togolese Sami Tchak's *Filles de Mexico* (*Daughters of Mexico*; Tchak 2008), the ethnic expectations of identity on the part of both Latin American and African nationals provoke the alienation that the Togolese protagonist feels in Mexico city despite his desire to belong. But even as the novel submits these ethnic expectations to critique as endogenous to south-south relations, Tchak presents a protagonist who accepts the incoherence of this lack of south-south solidarity and lets himself belong nonetheless. Then assessing this novel's critique of south-south impasse, the novel for me also reads like a reflection of Paulin's thinking. No stranger to the debates on identity politics, what I am most reminded of in this south-south context is Paulin's termed sociology or science of "collective representations."

This framework comes to Paulin based on his canonical critique of ethnophilosophy that produces what he termed an "alienated literature" (Hountondji 1996, xvii). It is alienated textuality because it is distanced from itself to become relevant to Western discourses in its doubling down on the mythic or folkloric (Hountondji 1996, xvii–xviii). In the words of Rahel Jaeggi, this philosophy would be alienated because it would live "in the opinions of others" rather than "in oneself" (Jaeggi 2014, 4). Paulin's stern and, at the time, deeply misunderstood critique, stemmed from his fervor to begin "demystifying Africanity" or "removing the mystic halo of values arbitrarily grafted" (Hountondji 1989, 7). Instead, he privileges African traditions of thought rather than the traditional, to arrive at the *sociology of collective representations*. He believed in the ever-evolving notion of human thought, the sense that epistemologies and frameworks are plural and not fixed, just as much as peoples' homes are not fixed due to the necropolitical deterritorialization pushing them out of their places of origin. In his words:

To study these representations, to express their manifest or latent content, to make explicit what they sometimes imply, to *examine their reciprocal relations, to appreciate their coherence*, the more or less systematic character of the whole, to determine its function, *its real scope and its limits in the life of the group and in relation to our present requirements*, is the task not of philosophy, but of an entirely different discipline: the sociology of collective representations. (Hountondji 1990, own translation, emphasis added)

This attention to present-day and reciprocal relations is foundational to Paulin's framework for a pluriversal sociology as he moved into his later thinking on the endogenous. At the root of this framework is the notion of a critical appropriation, that one can only begin to create an exegesis of knowledge from a culturally situated perspective. Therefore, the task of that philosopher is to appropriate one's own culture—function within it or further its episteme—but also *transcend* it.

It is in the transcendental that one arrives to the pushback that produces the alienation from Mexico that Tchak describes in his novel; a Mexico that denies belonging to the Togolese protagonist. And yet, the protagonist's insistence of seeking belonging nonetheless suggests that the Togolese has arrived at the point of Paulin's sociological transcendence: where he submits his endogenous culture to philosophical critique but also seeks reciprocal relations that are no longer bound to the kinds of Eurocentric alienation that Paulin critiqued in *African Philosophy*. If for Paulin a science for collective representations examines relations for what they are, examines them in their internal and external logic or contradictions, to paraphrase from Paulin (Hountondji 1990, 8), Tchak's character emulates this ethos: for in the twenty-first century it becomes, to cite Paulin "la condition première de la liberté" ("the first condition of liberty").

In the same way that Paulin continued to evolve his thinking on oral traditions and the endogenous, I also wonder how Paulin's thought would have evolved on the concept of this alienation when in contact with Latin America. As I reflect on these epistemological *reencuentros* with Paulin and his work, I am left wondering, too, if he would have agreed on my own appropriation of his frameworks; ones that perhaps also transcended from his own views about African societies in close comparative contact. It is an answer I cannot provide but one that I am grateful for, since so much of what he defined as culture and identity still grounds my work as I come back to him time after time. I am certain his work will thus transcend and continue to shape Africanists but also south-south scholars like myself, on the lookout for Paulin's perfected forms of cosmopolitanism.

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