



Paschah Mungwini, "African Philosophy: Emancipation and Practice"

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Pascah Mungwini. *African Philosophy: Emancipation and Practice* (Bloomsbury Introductions to World Philosophies). Bloomsbury Academic 2022. 224 pp. \$68 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350196490); \$22.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350196506).

Mungwini's *African Philosophy: Emancipation and Practice* marks the continuation of a trend in literature to free African philosophy from the lens and hegemony of oppression. The trend consists of African philosophers developing an introductory understanding of African philosophy on its own terms, minimizing references to Western philosophy as a starting point. In agreement with Mudimbe and Hountoudji, Mungwini sees the rejection of ethnophilosophy as a necessary starting point (4-5). The methodological approach of the book has at its core an evaluation of the debate over ethnophilosophy, developing a 'steadfast critique' (25) of the debate that has proven to be self-imprisoning in many ways (10). This affords students of world philosophy the opportunity to acquire a nuanced view in a philosophical tradition that has struggled to establish an independent identity and voice. The explicit motivation of the book is to advance an 'emancipative mission' (1). Mungwini strategically seeks to be contentious because philosophy advances, not through celebration, but by revisiting its past thoughts and determining mistakes and failures (23).

The perspective of Mungwini's text is participatory in many respects. The intent of the book is to participate in the practice of shaping the image of African philosophy by investigating its subject matter, divested of Eurocentric categories. This intention extends to the participatory interaction with the history of African philosophy, including the philosophical heritage that comes with colonialism (116). The reader is exhorted to understand the historical realities experienced by this philosophical heritage while also taking into consideration the emerging realities of African philosophy in its contemporary existence, coming out of bondage. The book's landscape can be partitioned into past, present, and future. The introduction and first chapter are devoted to viewing the state of African philosophy as the philosopher finds it, delivered from past to present. Mungwini understands that any discussion of the present state in African philosophy cannot be abstracted from the history that precedes it, but he does emphasize the power of autonomy and agency through establishing identity and voice, differentiating past from present (179). Chapters two and three offer guiding lights and perspectives on African philosophy at present, while four and five are devoted to developing African philosophy for futurity.

Mungwini contends that the beauty of philosophy in the broadest possible sense is to be found in the abundant variety of schools of thought, and for this reason the plethora of African philosophies is a treasure of high priority (14). The cartographic understanding of the terrain of African philosophy demonstrates its diversity and the challenge inherent in the attempt to simplify and summarize it. Nonetheless, Mungwini builds a concrete image of African philosophy, following Hountoudji's vaunted *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Indiana University Press 1983) that first defined the discipline with clarity.

As accessible as this text is to the newcomer, the history of African philosophy is challenging. Chapter one develops the terrain, which has many rugged crags. Mungwini is to be lauded for understanding the complex conversation that exists in African philosophy literature. Mungwini



conveys the conversation through rich and clear text that retains the sophistication of the genre, showing why it needs to be examined outside the light of ethnophilosophy and Western philosophic lenses. Chapter one can be taken on its own as a tour de force as a survey of African philosophy, especially in regards to methodological considerations of how to study the content.

Chapter two is a natural response to the conclusions of chapter one. If the first chapter is about the existing African philosophic literature's strengths and weaknesses, the second chapter is a call to start fresh and re-found the African perspective, to 'know thyself' (45). Moving forward with African philosophy has to begin in the present; the present is an inheritance of the past to be reflected upon. Following the work of Cameroonian philosopher Eboussi-Boulage and Congolese philosopher Mudimbe, the reflection of what the experiential 'thyself' is in African philosophy begins with understanding the nature of colonial imposition to dominate with language and to understand the scope and meaning of 'civilizing' indigenous peoples (46). Non-Africans should understand that the tools developed for other philosophical contexts are worse than inadequate for understanding African philosophy: some of these tools have been imposed upon African philosophy to distort its nature and forestall any possibility of genuinely understanding the tradition. Individual identity and collective identity will be the product of discourse that compares notes from within lived experience. Chapter two also handles the debate of 'particularistic' studies of African philosophy, discussing at some length Ghanaian philosopher Wiredu's commentary on Hountondji.

The weight of *African Philosophy* is heavily frontloaded: the citation-dense introduction and first three chapters feature a torrent of contention. Chapters four and five are forward-looking, offering 'emerging realities,' guidance for scholars and younger philosophers, and sage advice for where African philosophy is to go (170). With a mind toward the African diaspora, the future of African philosophy will necessarily be more diverse than it has been, and much of future African philosophizing will be done from somewhere other than African soil. Among the prescriptions Mungwini makes with this in mind, derivative of the preceding chapters, is that 'Rhodes must fall,' meaning that the bastion of Eurocentric philosophy can only change by way of revolution (126). This looks forward to the preconditions which could change academic spaces to promote justice and openness, and he sees 'Black Lives Matter' as being one such precondition (106). Another prescription is Mungwini's exhortation to look toward post-colonial 'African philosopher kings,' e.g., Nkrumah of Ghana and Nyerere of Tanzania (155). He emphasizes centralized inspiration that springs from thinkers on the African continent that pours outward to the rest of the world's African philosophers. As with all philosophies, philosophers from within the diverse traditions of the African continent offer varying sets of principles. Mungwini offers his own list of principles that are particularly thematic among the African nations, such as 'ujamaa,' a word that is among the few concepts carrying distinct 'Africa-ness,' as it means something along the lines of 'family-hood.' He offers an expansive discussion of the prospects of Ubuntu philosophy, following closely with Mogobe Ramose much of the way. His view is that, through its rich heritage, Ubuntu has positioned itself at the center of the struggle for philosophical emancipation (165). While Ubuntu will likely be a big part of the process of liberation, it is just one facet of the answer, and so Mungwini encourages all to take up its study with vigor.

The question of intercultural dialogue is addressed in chapter three. This is a surprising chapter, considering Mungwini's stance held earlier in the book, which might come off as 'exclusivist.' He is sensitive to this concern and offers some recontextualization to offer those seeking intercultural dialogue, including the healthy-minded approach that African philosophy has to have a voice before it can be put into dialogue. Only with an authentic identity can African philosophy offer anything substantive to intercultural dialogue. Mungwini explains in a lengthy exposition that the history of philosophy has been 'hegemonic' in its exclusionary nature, which has only done injury to philosophy (80). Instead, Mungwini offers a view of African philosophy in practice, which habitates itself, decolonializes, self-liberates, and then offers itself as an identity to participate on equal footing with other philosophies. It is defined and understood from within, not being externally imposed upon by other philosophies, mythologized, and parochialized, especially by Eurocentrism (98).

Mungwini's book finds as a much-needed place in literature. It serves as an introductory text for newcomers to the specific domain of philosophical inquiry by summarizing the most energetic and visible texts that have shaped African philosophy. However, the book is not merely an introductory text: the critical commentary, philosophical reexamination of earlier philosophers, and the insights into its subject matter make the text an important contribution to the organization, recalibration, and further development of African philosophy. The organization of the text into past, present, and future dimensions means that the text makes for an excellent survey or handbook for the genre, and the novel insights make it worthy scholarship in the burgeoning field. It is written concisely and with clarity, it is engaging, and it is conceptually precise, and its style elicits enthusiasm for the subject.

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