Ethno Philosophy Critique

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Abstract: The question of African identity has always been quite insistigating and raised many debates, especially when it comes to assessing first works produced by Europeans on African philosophy. In the 70s, many philosophers wrote on Ethno philosophy criticizing its methods and the Western perspective of its “philosophical” works. In fact, according to scholars there are many cons than pros; very little positive contribution to the current African philosophy is credited to Ethno philosophy. This paper gives an overview of ethno philosophy and then briefly presents the key criticisms as well as critics to ethno philosophy, and somehow counterparts the positions put forward by many philosophers toward ethno philosophy.

Keywords: ethno philosophy, Criticism, philosophy.

1. Introduction
The emergence of African philosophy has put many scholars/philosophers in hot discussions on what works were ought to be considered philosophical or at least resembling African thought. In the 70s, lots of discussions were held on whether ethno philosophy should be regarded as philosophy, as an attempt to integrate it or not as part of African philosophy works. Such discussions led many philosophers to strongly criticize ethno philosophy, though very few could see some good in it. In this regard, in our discussion of the topic we will focus on some of the critics to ethno philosophy with emphasis on the arguments put forward by each of them regarding aspects they consider negative, in such a way they do not see ethno philosophy as African philosophy. The next step will be putting forward our own point of view on the matter. We do not intend to present the criticisms chronologically, though, since this work is not a mere compilation of previous analysis on the subject. Hence, we will discuss the issue randomly, but avoiding misleading and confusing the readers, pointing out the crucial aspects of the topic. We start by briefly presenting key issues underlying ethno philosophy advocates, for a better understanding of the criticism held over it, then the critics of ethno philosophy. And, finally, we will present our point of view.

2. Ethno Philosophy
In this chapter, we look into the first philosophical works produced which were famously known through their advocates as ethno philosophy, with emphasis on the paper by the Belgian priest, Placide Temples, in 1945. It is believed that ethno philosophy emerged through ethnology. In this view, ethno philosophy results from ethnological works. Ngoma Binda supports that the starting of written philosophy works was marked by the French translation of the work of the Belgian priest, Placide Temples (Ngoenha, 1993:81). It is highlighted though, that Tempels developed a systematic philosophy of the black men on the bases of the scholarly philosophy model (ibid). The issue is to understand what came to be known as ethno philosophy for a better analysis of the criticism over it. The major advocates of ethno philosophy are Placide Tempels and Alexis Kagame, though reference is made to John S. Mbiti. But harsh criticism was only addressed to both Tempels and Kagame. On the other hand, Mbiti’s approach on ethno philosophy is essentially based on theology and according to it, no doubt that there is African philosophy in traditional cultures. He postulates that African knowledge cannot, however, be categorized in highly identifiable structures. Added to that, philosophy is revealed in history and culture of people and the cultural context must be the starting point in the construction and development of its structure. Lastly, Mbiti mentions that Africans do not need a specialized subject designated “philosophy”, for philosophy is inseparable of its own daily actions and essence. Tempels, on the other hand, was interested on the question of humanity of primitive black, and acknowledging this humanity was deviant to Bruhl theory of pre-logical. He expected recognition of a Bantu philosophy as a condition for normalization of relations among races. Tempels discovered from black people “a logically coherent ontology”. And the key to all enigmas of primitive man was through understanding him. However, he supports that only the European could learn Bantu ontological structures, that is, the Bantu themselves had no such ability. So, black knowledge could only derive from knowledge of European men as result of their mentoring of black men. One of Tempels claims is that the primary metaphoristic category of thought of African in Bantu societies is force. That is, the reality is dynamic, to be is force. Tempels presents three points of view of the relation to be and force 1. To be is different from force, that is, living beings can or not have force; 2. Force is part of being, that is, to be is more than force, but it depends on it; 3. To be is force, that is, both complement one another. For Tempels the Bantu reflects the last relation of being and force. In other words, the life of African thought is structured in understanding and defining force, and this does not happen with Europeans since they seek to understand and define being. Tempels’ Bantu philosophy was strongly criticized with the argument that it results from general conclusions which seek to characterize the thought of the whole continent, and this is hard to do in a significant way. Further ahead we will analyze other criticisms addressed to Tempels claims. Alexis Kagame wrote ten years later on Rwandan Bantu philosophy of to be, and like Tempels believes in a system of Bantu philosophy. But Kagame focuses on rigorous grammatical issue of linguistic structures of Kirvarwanda with a strong influence of Aristotle conceptions. Kagame attempted to demonstrate that Bantu language structures revealed a complex ontology solely African by nature. Tempels, on the one hand, believed that the ontological system derived from unconscious and lacked adequate and exact formulation at
philosophical level whereas Kagame stated that “if there is a philosophy in our cultural substrate, it was inevitable formulated” (Ngoenaha, 1993:84). In sum, the origin of ethno philosophy is assigned to Tempels and Kagame, despite harsh criticisms addressed to them.

3. Criticism to ethno philosophy
This chapter discusses on ethno philosophy critics and we will analyze key arguments presented against ethno philosophy. Criticism on ethno philosophy puts scholars in two different poles, some consider it irrelevant and dangerous - a linkage to the traditional system of old-fashioned beliefs in a modern world, others consider it as a good starting point for a rational philosophical research. Apart from these two poles, there are intermediate positions which question some methodological aspects or specific implications on ethno philosophy claims (Imbo, 1998). Many philosophers, such as the Kenyan Oruka, characterize ethno philosophy as transformation of mythology in philosophy and states that there is tendency in ethno philosophy of equating African philosophical thought to a traditional thought. The main question often raised is whether ethno philosophy is in fact philosophy. Concerns are also addressed to methods applied by ethno philosophers in their works and the category of the object they intend to restore "African philosophy", the so-called primitive philosophy, understood as spontaneous system of collective thought, implicit, inalterable for all members of the society which accedes (Hountondji). Castiano (2005) quoting Hountondji postulates that the place occupied by ethno philosophy and ethno sciences in scientific works is that of producing an "inventory" of the so-called traditional and indigenous knowledge (local) for a later exportation for research institutes and laboratories located in the developed countries. Thus, collected data is worked up in the western without active involvement and knowledge and even consent of the African. In this regard, ethno philosophy did not evolve to intervene in African societies. According Castiano (2010) quoting Benin philosopher, Hountondji, the ethno philosophers Tempels, Kagame, Mbiti and others, were not doing a service for philosophy domain, instead they were collecting ethnographic data on popular sayings, packaging them in "classic boxes of philosophy" such as cosmology, ontology, epistemology, ethic, etc, aiming to show the world that Africans can also produce philosophy works. The question raised is whether ethno philosophers deliberately intended to “cheat” Africans and if that completely nullify the contribution they brought into African philosophy? We will come back to this question later. On the hand Crahay in his “Le decollage conceptuel: conditions d’une philosophie bantoue” claims that Tempels’ contribution was both positive and negative. It is negative to the extent that Tempels committed intellectual crime by affirming that Bantu were not able to express and theorize their philosophy and by confusing people’s primitiveness with philosophy as academic discipline. The positive aspect is that Tempels anticipated European anthropologists and missionaries since they could not see philosophy in African culture, and for them that was a mere product of "primitive mentality". Crahay, however, focus more on negative aspects of Tempels contribution than positive. For him, what Tempels described in Bantu philosophy is not rigorously talking about philosophy and for him philosophy is explicit, analytical, radical critique and self-critique, systematic at least at the beginning though unveiled (Graness & Kresse, 1999: 102). In addition, as later supported by Hountondji, Tempels confused philosophy with ethnography. Masolo (1994) on ethno philosophy criticism presented by Hountondji, he states that Hountondji sees ethno philosophy as a new version of Hegel’s analysis of history and for him Tempels attempted to achieve with philosophy what Hegel achieved with history. For Kagame, Hountondji, according to Masolo, supports that Hountondji was still a prisoner of ideological myth – of collective African philosophy, despite his consistent linguistic analysis and inferences. Apart from that, he states that it would have been better if Kagame had supplied philosophical texts of Africans or transcribed their orality so that the interpretations were considered as effective universal accessible philosophical speech. Hountondji made a slight criticism on Crahay critique to ethno philosophy by stating that the inadequacy of Crahay’s work lies on mythological degradation not scientific of works or texts which respond to the description “African philosophy”. According to Hountondji, philosophy is an activity not a system and as an activity, philosophy stands on as a process which expresses and surpasses itself in history and in that way it surpasses the system (Masolo, 1994: 199). In sum, there are many criticisms over ethno philosophy, and the critic who stands out because of his arguments is the philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji. Next we put forward our point of view on the matter and attempt to answer the question raised earlier on whether ethno philosophers deliberately intended to “cheat” Africans and if that completely nullify the contribution they brought into African philosophy?

4. Final remarks
Having briefly discussed on ethno philosophy and its critics, we concluded that ethno philosophy had considerable contribution to African thought to the extent that the first philosophical “heated” discussion evolved in response to what ethno philosophy attempted to present as African philosophy and somehow that catapulted latter philosophy. Added to that, some written philosophical works developed from criticism of the negative aspects of ethno philosophy, and they are currently designated African philosophy. We support that ethno philosophy might, on the one hand, have developed with the aim of benefitting the western through data collection on Africans to improve dominance, but on the other hand, it awakened Africans on the need to look into Africans as men with philosophy, and this did not occur prior to ethno philosophers. Apart from that, the information on myths, rituals, for instance, might have been collected in European perspective, but they are valid source of information for research for both philosophers and anthropologists. For us, African philosophy is not the one merely produced by Africans, but that produced by someone irrespective of his/her origins, but who lives and experiences African reality and above all wants others have such experience. In this regard, we understand that ethno philosophy is African philosophy in its first way of philosophical works, despite its methodological faults, among other problems. It is up to scholars to identify and make a good use as much as possible of the positive contribution ethno philosophy may have to philosophy or other disciplines.
References

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