

# **African Philosophy as a Space of thought: Reflections on Bruce Janz's Enactivism**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

This work is a reflection on the enactivistic reading of African philosophy by Bruce Janz. Janz's new book marks a watershed in the history of African philosophy and it aims to usher in the idea of cognitive science in African philosophy. Although this is a laudable work, the scope and method of enactivism is insufficient for the discourse of African philosophy. While adopting the critical analysis, this article argues that for African philosophy to show that it is truly philosophical and truly African there is need for an all-encompassing method that will take cognizance of the different issues in African philosophy.

**African philosophy, enactivism, ethnophilosophy, definition, method**

## **Introduction**

In her relatively short existence in the academia, African philosophy has witnessed different turns and divergent views. The publication of Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* in the 1940s put a stop to the now stale debate as to the ontology of the exercise. However it did so not without a penalty. It created the challenge of *doing* African philosophy if it does *exist*. This challenge may today include the problem of language, methodology etc.

In the early stages of its existence, African philosophy attracted the minds and brains of scholars, ethnographers, missionaries, theologians, anthropologists, sociologists etc. who brought into the conversations the tools and models of epistemic investigation as obtainable in their various

disciplines. Instead of enriching African philosophy, these various methods and their practitioners invented new patterns of thinking and philosophy for Africans either through imposing their patterns of thoughts on Africans by way of translating their conceptual idioms as in the case of Alexis Kagame and Marcel Graiule or inventing a new thinking pattern altogether as we have in the works of J. Jahn, Mbiti and others. Although it can be aver that the works of some these scholars qualifies to be called African philosophy, the content and depth of some of them betrays the discipline.

Paulin Houdtondi in his book *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* attempted to censor the works purportedly labeled as African philosophy but his scientific inclination betrays his mission and quest. He noted that “By African philosophy I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves” (1996a: 33). Here there are two conditions that qualify a work as African philosophy. First that the author is an African and second, that the author described his work as philosophical, this self-acclaimed declaration does not qualify a work to be called African philosophy. Bruce Janz’s most recent work *African Philosophy an Enactivist Cognition* is a bold response to Houndtonji’s critique of the works of Tempels, Mbiti and others which Houndtonji labeled as ethnophilosophy. This work is a reflection on the attempt of Janz to addressed the issues raised by Hountondji.

The current task of the African philosophic mind is one of definition, that is to say, to show that African philosophy is truly philosophical and truly African and one way to tackle this has been to first resolve the question of method. To achieve this task, this work aim to first show that the arguments of Bruce Janz on space of thought which led him to an enactivistic rendering of some texts in African philosophy is unconvincing especially when applied to other texts in African philosophy. At best it glorifies ethnographical method in African philosophy. Furthermore, this

paper argues that the neglect of African languages in the debate of the Africanness of African philosophy is an oversight taken too far.

### **Bruce Janz's Enactivistic rendering of African Philosophy**

Janz's task is an attempt to make African philosophy truly philosophical and truly African and to demarcate African philosophy from other fields of knowledge. In order to achieve this task, Janz, correctly rooted the problematic on the question of method. In his article "The Problem of Method in African Philosophy" he noted that:

Method as we see it here is a way of clearing impediments to understanding, and those impediments are largely understood in terms of past regimes of knowledge and earlier practices within African philosophy. It is also, despite the now commonly expressed sentiment that we must move past the project of defining African philosophy and start doing it, still a project of demarcation, that is, showing who's in and who's out, or what is in and what is out. (Janz, 2018:5)

It is in the context of this debate that his recent work, *African Philosophy and Enactivist Cognition* should be understood. The search for that which is truly African and truly philosophical can be understood using an image which Janz repeated use in this book, that of the map. Maps, in the modern era, have often been used to lay claim to territory or region, to establish legitimacy, provide the basis for citizenship, and create identity. He went to consider a set of concepts within African philosophy which have been used "spatially" instead of "platially," that is, they have been used to establish and/or defend a territory known as "African Philosophy" rather than generate new concepts within African philosophy. (Janz, 2009:29)

Janz attempted to show the connection between African philosophy and cognitive science or what he calls enactivist African philosophy. He moves from place to space. This is so because, Janz avers no matter how abstract a philosophy gets it does not lose its root in places. Place for him is event and as such a space of thought. And although these concepts strive for universals they are rooted in spaces.

To paraphrase the question asked by Souleymane Bachir Diagne in the foreword to the work, can there be a definition (method) of African philosophy by intention by which all texts in the field are subsumed, or should we simply accept that given the openness and the diversity of the field we can only work with a definition (method) by extension? “After all, is there any region of the world that has definition (method) by intension of ‘its’ philosophy? Or consider it important to have one? For Janz, African philosophy should not be restricted by projecting a method which will demarcate its texts or limits its space of thoughts as Janz prefers to put it but rather creates an environment in which radically different kinds of thought might coexist.(Janz, 2023:1)

In his earlier work *Philosophy in an African Place* (2009) Janz already argued that there was need for African philosophers to try to carve out a space on the philosophical map by finding methods, themes or concepts that were truly African and truly philosophical, and for this method to be African it need not be antithetical to African languages. (Janz, 2023:5) Janz enactivist approach aimed at a definition of African philosophy by intension which argues that cognition is not the representation of reality but arises through the interaction, which is an embodied process, of the organisms that we are with the reality of our environment.

Enactivism as an approach in African philosophy will make it possible, Janz argued, to both achieve Paulin Hountondji’s goal of having an African philosophy not reducible to anonymously held static worldviews and at the same time have a philosophy that takes seriously the complexity of the African existential experiences. As a method, it leverages elements of the existing African philosophical tradition, which anticipate and run parallel to enactivism as an explanation within cognitive science. Furthermore, it allows a rethinking of philosophy itself and a deeper interrogation of the human within a space of thought. (Janz, 2023:15)

To demonstrate the possibility and credibility of this approach to African philosophy, Janz attempted an enactivist reading of some major texts in African philosophy pointing out the space of thought mapped out by the various scholars he studied.

### **What is Enactivistic African Philosophy?**

In *Philosophy in an African Place* (2009), Janz argued that there was need for African philosophers to try to carve out a space on the philosophical map by finding methods, themes, or concepts that were truly African and truly philosophical. The foundational concepts that would guarantee this condition, for him, were tradition, reason, wisdom, culture, language, and practicality. In responding to the spatial question imposed on it from the outside as Janz sees it (Is there an African philosophy?) he moved to a spatial question which is “What does it mean to do philosophy in this (African) place? Enactivistic approach is an attempt to rehabilitate the notion of the spatial (Janz, 2023:5)

The question “Is there an African philosophy?” is illegitimate because for him it is not only a non-African question, meant as a challenge and a demand for definition against the backdrop of already-existing philosophy elsewhere in the world, but it also frames African philosophy as something that does or does not exist, rather than something that is becoming-philosophy. (Janz, 2023:6)

According to Janz, all philosophies worth the name are becoming-philosophy, and if they are not, they are at best history of ideas. They are records of the passage of thought under conditions that are no longer extant, they are not enacting thought in the space of current conditions. History of ideas might, of course, become part of the conditions of current thought, but then we find ourselves back at the question of becoming-philosophy.

Janz calls his approach an “enactivist” African philosophy, a term he borrowed from contemporary phenomenological cognitive sciences. Enactivism, according to him is already present in African philosophy and has been for a long time. Since when?

The goal of this approach, according to Janz, is to draw out a way of doing philosophy that is already present in many major works but remains implicit. Thus, in his application of this approach, he tried to re-examine the works of Mbiti and others. The aim of this application was to show how enactivist cognitive science was relevant to African philosophy, or to philosophy in general?

Janz claim that there was a time when almost no attention was paid to questions of the environment, for instance, or to the place of women in African philosophy, and that has changed is not true. African thinkers and societies have always whether positively or negatively reflected on the place of women in the society.

Given its phenomenological dispositions, Janz argues that an enactivist version of African philosophy begins with intentionality which works not as the contingent representations of individuals but as the dynamic space of meaning made available within the places of African life. Intentionality and self-understanding for Janz is my experience and my knowledge, and I am a (perhaps partial) window on reality through that experience. This idea betrays the communitarian ingredients in Africa. Beyond my individual experience, we have in Africa our experience, our perception and intentionality. We have in Africa, the view of the people over a particular person say adulterer. The judgement though can be bracketed out when reflecting on the life of the person however it plays a decisive role in the presentation of that person as a leader in the community. Janz believes that when we phenomenologically decenter the first, second and third person we will

get something roughly enactivism. This mode of decentering is also non-African. Senghor has made it clear that the Africa does not study the other through its testicles as in an insect manner. Rather he embraces other and integrates the other. His knowledge of the other is one of emotion and love. This again shows that performing the Husserlian phenomenology on the other is almost an insurmountable task for the African because it reduces the other to an object or an it.

To be fair, Janz holds that philosophy is shared cognition, it is thinking together and it is thinking that is not simply located within individual minds. What does Janz mean by thinking together? Was Plato's *Republic* a reflection of the community's view? How many thinkers followed Descartes to the mountains in his *Meditations*? In fairness to Janz, he thinks that, it makes sense to talk about the philosophy of a place in a way that is not simply reducible to the individual opinions of people who inhabit the place. Is it possible to talk about the philosophy of place without the opinion of the people who live in the place? Is the philosophy of a place different from the opinions of the people who live there? What is the philosophy of a place? The philosophy of a place as Janz sees it is nothing but the worldview, culture, language and IKS (indigenous knowledge) of the people. While it is true that philosophy can be generated through these means, these means does not constitute a philosophy on its own. It requires individual reflection, ratiocination and analysis. Philosophy is an individualistic reflection on a problem. A community's IKS does not constitute a philosophy. Simply IKS is the undiluted metaphysical, epistemological, axiological and logical patterns of understanding from an African perspective. It aims at furthering decolonization and promoting afrocentricism. Indigenous knowledge is not scientific in the strict sense of science. However, since broadly speaking, science is an organized body of knowledge, IKS is scientific to

the extent that it is systematic and organized. The methodology is derivable from the linguistic, worldviews, cultural norms and community/conventional beliefs of the people. Janz 's position would lead us to some versions of idealism since it is impossible to have a shared set of practices and implicitly agreed-upon questions and problematics.

For Janz, enactivism offers something important to the contemporary practice of African philosophy because it does not ask the question, "What does it mean to be African?" but rather, "Given the place of life and the space of thought, as well as the existing activated concepts in this place, what might emerge as African here?" Put positively, an enactivist approach to African philosophy reorients "the human as a problem to be interrogated and as a process that can be mobilized for interventions, rather than weighting it as an object of knowledge"(Janz, 2023:13)

It is the emergence of trans-african (Definition needed) that have given rise to the question of identity in African philosophy. The question remains "who is an African?" Janz approach to African philosophy will take us back to the history which the contemporary African philosophers do not wish to be reminded of. It is an attempt to rush us back to ethnological method in African philosophy – an African philosophy it is infant stage.

Abraham Olivier's article "Enactivist African Philosophy: A Response" argues that Bruce Janz makes a significant contribution to African philosophy as no other work has yet made the connection between African philosophy and enactivism. Olivier's aim is to give a critical response to the book by connecting *Enactivist Cognition* with Janz's earlier *Philosophy in an African Place*. (Olivier, 2023:1) This is an ambitious task given that enactivism in African philosophy is a still debatable issue and any attempt at reconciling it with Janz' previous works makes the arguments against enactivism also valid for those other works.

Sanya Osha's "Spaces of African Thought: A Critique of an Enactivist Rendering" addresses Bruce Janz's "enactivist" reading of African philosophy from two perspectives. His work is an attempt to unpack the space in which African philosophy finds itself which remains problematic. (how does that space remain problematic? African philosophy occupies a unique space in the history of knowledge. Although it is relatively young in the academic but the issues, contents and space that it occupies is one that makes other discipline to be envious of it. Janz argues that African philosophy allows for only a few or no possibilities for radical thought. This is not true. There are various or divergent views or positions in every discipline, while some are moderate others are extreme and radical. African philosophy does not restrict the thinker to a particular position. In fact it is a discipline which the practitioners began by questioning its existence and the legitimacy of the exercise. And in this questioning, some thinkers took a radical position in asserting the non-existence of African philosophy. Though this debate is now staled but its impact on the development of the discipline cannot be under estimated. Also Osha noted that Janz's reading of Sophie Oluwole serves to debunk this claim. For Osha, Oluwole's thought highlights the challenges of building a modern African philosophy within the context of postcoloniality, in which problems of untranslatability are encountered when utilizing a metropolitan language, which, in her case, is English. But, beyond the problem of untranslatability, she is able to delineate a holistic cosmology that, in multiple ways, incorporates, complicates, and extends the borders of philosophy.(Osha, 2023) This reading of Oluwole renders her work to simplistic.

Benedetta Lanfrachi noted that Janz opens up a new space of conversation in the field of African philosophy through an innovative approach that applies insights from the cognitive sciences to the humanities in order to highlight the relationship between thought and context, between theorization and experience. Through the interpretive lens of enactivism, Janz ventures into new readings of

well-known themes and personalities in African philosophy and also introduces interesting new themes and personalities to the African philosophical conversation. Janz also intentionally bridges African and Africana thought. While this article contests the application of enactivism to *all* the philosophers treated in *Enactivist Cognition*, it applauds Janz's search for new, creative, and productive spaces for and of philosophy. (Lanfrachi, 2023)

Lanfrachi is not satisfied with the scope of enactivism as it cannot be applied to some of the philosophers Janz applied it to. This argument shows a limitation in the application of enactivism. Enactivism as a cognitive science can rarely do much for African philosophy since its scope and technique is beyond some philosophical thought in Africa. Some of the issues and problematic in African philosophy are merely semantic, ontological or hermeneutics to reduce all to the enterprise of phenomenology will lead to avoidable errors. Again we can argue that the question: "what is African philosophy?" which borders on a body of literature to prove that it is truly philosophical and truly African has not been resolved by enactivism. This is so because given the issues and questions raised at Bodija during the now infamous, staled and baseless debate on the ontology of African philosophy (which the distractors where *doing* i.e. they were *doing* African philosophy without knowing. To *doubt* the existence of African philosophy is to *do* African philosophy and assert its existence).

One problem that looms large and needed a clarification because of the cleavage it created during and after the debate was the question of definition of African philosophy which was an attempt at demarcating between what literature should count as African philosophy and which are not. To do this, methods were invented and critiques of some literature emerged to persuade thinkers to add or not to include such a literature to the body of knowledge tagged African philosophy. It is in this context that Obi Oguejiofor saw the auto critique of ethnophilosophy by Houndtondji and its

damaging effects on Senghorian negritude; he took it upon himself to exonerate Senghor from the ethnological charges despite the obvious ethnological pretensions of the reactionary negritude of Senghor. Oguejiofor relied on the method of hermeneutics invented in the discourse of African philosophy by Theophilus Okere to defend Senghor and as such added Senghor's work to the body of literature called African philosophy.

The invention of Bruce Janz has not successfully demarcated between what counts as African philosophy and what should not. To be sure, Janz has arrogated philosophy to ethnology and accepted ethnophilosophy wholeheartedly and squarely as an authentic African philosophy. Although this acceptance is implicit in his work, his treatment of Mbiti as an African philosopher raises some fundamental questions and it goes to show the intention and motivation of enactivism. While Mbiti can be correctly labeled as African traditional religionist his philosophical prowess is suspect. Mbiti only engaged in speculation in order to show the religiosity of the African people he studied. Masolo succinctly noted that "... Mbiti merely parades African traditional beliefs (which, to these critics, are nothing but mythology) as 'philosophy.'" (Masolo, 1994:104). Hence, the entering of Mbiti in Janz's 2023 work despite the ethnological charges against it is somewhat startling. Enactivism is too liberal as a tool in African philosophy since through it any texts could qualify as African philosophy. Also it is important to mention here that a work could be written within a space of thought and yet not philosophical. Mbiti's work is not philosophical. Finally, Janz tries to impose science or neuroscience on African philosophy when some aspects of African philosophy is purely speculation and not scientific in the strict sense of science. Despite Janz's attempt to respond to some of the issues raised by some scholars who read him, his discourse of the context and history of the book have not succinctly approached why this method is not viable in

all spheres of African philosophy. (Janz, 2023) At best, though laudable, this method is only applicable to some aspect of African philosophy.

## **Conclusion**

Janz's quest was to attempt a definition and understanding of African philosophy within a space of thought. This eventually led him to search for African philosophy in an empty space, a place where it does not exist. It is an endless divide into ethnologism. African philosophy should be rescued from such overambitious attempt. Janz's attempt is like the event described in the opening passages of *A Neurophenomenology of Awe and Wonder*, (Gallagher, S. et. al. 2015) it is a wishful desire too late to achieve and dead on arrival. It could have flourished in the early days of African philosophy. However, in today's discourse it seems to remove African philosophy from its roots and place it scientifically on phenomenology.

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