Odera Oruka in the Twenty-first Century

Kenyan Philosophical Studies, II

Edited by
Reginald M.J. Oduor
Oriare Nyarwath
Francis E.A. Owakah

The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements                                      v
Introduction                                           1

**Part I. Life, Works, and Philosophical Orientation**

   *Hudson Ahmed Liyai, Oriare Nyarwath & Francis E.A. Owakah*

2. Elements of Uniqueness in Odera Oruka’s Four Trends 29
   *Crispinous Iteyo*

**Part II. Sage Philosophy**

3. Reviving Sage Philosophy?                           41
   *Kai Kresse*

4. Inter-cultural Wisdom Research                     51
   *Anke Graness*

5. The Sage and the Shèngrén 圣人: Confucianism and     73
   Henry Odera Oruka’s Sage Philosophy
   *James Garrison*

6. Odera Oruka on Culture Philosophy and its role      99
   in the S.M. Otieno Burial Trial
   *Gail M. Presbey*

7. The Semantics of Sagacity and its Implications for   119
   Odera Oruka’s Sage Philosophy
   *Okoth Okombo*

8. Philosophic Sagacity: A Re-colonizing De-colonization? 131
   *Patrick Maison Dikirr*

9. The Methodological Similarities between Odera Oruka’s 155
   Sage Philosophy Project and the Socratic Dialectic
   *Patrick O. Nyabul*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Philosophic Sagacity: Its Relevance to the Task of Addressing Twenty-first Century World Crises</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Peter Oruka Odera</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part III. Moral, Social and Political Philosophy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Oruka on the Role of Philosophy: An Interpretation</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>D.A. Masolo</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>The Relevance of the Political Thought of Odera Oruka to Early Twenty-First Century Kenya</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Reginald M.J. Oduor</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Oruka’s Right to a Human Minimum as a Principle of Global Justice</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Oriare Nyarwath</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sirkku K. Hellsten</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>The Relevance of Odera Oruka’s Parental Earth Ethics as an Eco-Philosophy</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Jacinta Mwende Maweu</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gilbert E.M. Ogutu</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>About the Contributors</strong></td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To all those African and Africanist scholars committed to the intellectual, cultural, social, political and economic liberation of our continent
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*Reginald M.J. Oduor, Oriare Nyarwath & Francis E.A. Owakah*
Introduction

REGINALD M.J. ODUOR, ORIARE NYARWATH & FRANCIS E.A. OWAKAH

Earlier versions of the papers in this volume were originally presented at the H. Odera Oruka International Symposium held in Nairobi, Kenya, from Tuesday 19th to Thursday 21st November, 2013. The symposium reflected on the immense contribution of Professor H. Odera Oruka (1944-1995) to the growth of contemporary African philosophy, as well as on the way in which he helped to locate African philosophy within the global philosophical discourse. His work in areas such as normative and applied ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, and, most notably, philosophic sagacity, continues to play a pivotal role in the current discourse on African philosophy. He was also one of the founders of Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya, whose New Series is currently an online, open access, bi-annual peer-reviewed publication found at http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index, and its December 2012 issue was dedicated to his memory.

The idea behind the Symposium was spawned by Profs. Aloo Osotsi Mojola of St. Paul’s University, Limuru, Kenya, and James Ogude of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. They were concerned about the fact that many young academics in Kenya and beyond are unaware of the robust scholarly contribution of the late Professor Oruka. Mr. Eliphas Nyamogo of the Goethe Institute in Nairobi, who was in the company of the two professors, indicated that the Institute would be happy to support such a venture. A Symposium Organising Committee was then formed comprising of Mr. Eliphas Nyamogo, Profs. A.O. Mojola, James Ogude, D.A. Masolo, Drs. Oriare Nyarwath, Francis Owakah and Reginald Oduor. The Committee envisaged a Symposium that was easily accessible to young scholars and members of the public at large. Towards this end, it resolved to identify an easily accessible venue free from the aura of elite academic gatherings in prestigious hotels with prohibitive conference fees. Consequently, it chose the Goethe Institute Nairobi Auditorium. The Committee also resolved to convene the gathering to coincide with UNESCO’s World Philosophy Day scheduled annually for the third Thursday of November.
It was a great pleasure to have presentations by scholars based in Kenya, as well as papers by a number of academics based in other countries, namely, Tanzania, Finland, Austria, and the USA (see “About the Contributors”). It was also wonderful to have some members of Professor Oruka’s family at the Symposium, and to have one of his sons, Mr. Peter Oruka Odera, present a paper.

One of the highlights of the Symposium was the re-launch of Professor Oruka’s *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy* originally published by the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS) in 1991. It was re-issued by the Philosophical Association of Kenya at the Symposium through a generous grant from the Goethe Institute. During the re-launch, there was a discussion of the book ably guided by three panelists, namely, Professors D.A. Masolo and Gail Presbey and Dr. Oriare Nyarwath.

The papers in this collection have been divided into three broad categories:

2. Sage Philosophy.

However, the classification of papers into (2) and (3) above is imprecise because there is no distinct body of knowledge that is exclusive to philosophic sagacity. Instead, the philosophic sages address issues that fall into specific fields of philosophic inquiry such as metaphysics, ethics and political philosophy, so that their thoughts can be categorised accordingly. Indeed, Oruka’s own vision was of an African philosophy that inquires into various fields of philosophy by drawing from the insights of the African philosophic sages as well as from non-African philosophic traditions.

One issue of considerable philosophical import that frequently arose in the course of editing this volume was the confusion between the phrases “should be” and “ought to be.” While the former is ambivalent, the latter is avowedly prescriptive. Nevertheless, a number of authors frequently use “should be” where they mean “ought to be,” even in contexts in which they themselves use the term “normative.” It is therefore high time we insisted on keeping the clear distinction between these two phrases firmly in view, and we have
sought, as far as possible, to do this in our editing of the papers in this volume.

Similarly, the important distinction between “prove” on the one hand, and “argue” or “illustrate” on the other, is becoming blurred in our time. While those in the legal profession sometimes loosely use the term “prove” to refer to the act of seeking to convince a judge or jury that their clients’ cases are strong, it has been a useful tradition in philosophy to reserve the term “proof” for sound arguments - those whose premises are true, and whose conclusions necessarily follow from those premises. However, most of our philosophical discourses do not present such arguments, so that it is more accurate to say of them that they are “arguing for a position,” or “seeking to illustrate the cogency of a position.”

Another issue that we had to contend with in the course of editing the papers in this volume was how to refer to Professor H. Odera Oruka in scholarly writing. Some of the authors insist on referring to him as “Odera Oruka,” while others are happy to refer to him simply as “Oruka.” This divergence of opinion reminds us that the advent of colonialism distorted many aspects of African life, not least the mode of naming. This is an important issue, considering that one way in which we human beings gain control of our environment is through the names that we give to people, places and other things around us. Similarly, we develop our own identities through names given to us, as well as those that we might give to ourselves. Thus the colonialists got greater control over the Africans when they (the Africans) took on European names and modes of naming. Note that the colonialists rarely reciprocated the Africans’ receptiveness to their names.

Colleagues teaching in Africa are aware of the confusion around “main names/family names/surnames.” There is the additional problem occasioned by the entry of names in data bases, requiring that the main name be given first followed by the first name/s. Sadly, many African authors now use this same format in their everyday lives, so that one often sees names such as “Otieno Gerald” instead of “Gerald Otieno.” In the 1970’s and 1980’s, it was “trendy” for Kenyan students to re-arrange their names thus in the belief that mentioning their African names first conferred more dignity on those names: perhaps it did, but it was also a function of confusing the format of database presentation with everyday formats.
Furthermore, the discussion on how to refer to H. Odera Oruka in scholarly writing often revolves around the idea of a surname, with some asserting that he had a two-name surname (“Odera Oruka,”) while others are emphatic that his surname was “Oruka.” Yet the very idea of a surname is foreign to many, if not all, African cultures, and certainly alien to his Luo culture. In an indigenous Luo setting, he would have been “Odera wuod Oruka” (“Odera son of Oruka”), abbreviated as “Odera k’Oruka” (literally “Odera of Oruka”). Thus in an indigenous Luo setting, his name is simply “Odera,” and neither “Odera Oruka,” nor “Oruka,” because Oruka was his father’s name, not his own.

The Luo give names in accordance with the time of day or the season in which a child is born, memorable events that occur around the time a child is born, or in honour of a departed kin. They sometimes also give an individual further names in the course of his or her life. Thus the late popular Kenyan Luo Musician, Ochieng’ Kabaselleh, in his “Apuoyo Obago Miel (The Hare has Called a Dance Party”), highlighted two of the criteria by which his community chooses additional names for its members in the course of their lives when he sang: “Wan jokochung’ tir: wanyaloga miyo ng’ato nying kaluwore kod timne kata gichuech mamare (We are steadfast people: we can give someone a name in accordance with his/her behaviour or physical appearance.)” While Westerners may be tempted to regard names acquired this way as “nicknames,” some of them actually assume a formal status and are passed on to members of subsequent generations, not as surnames, but in honour of specific departed members of the family. Whatever the criteria used, in Luo thought a name is meant to serve much more than the function of a label. Yet this is lost when a Luo receives a foreign name such as McDonald or McGregor, or adopts the idea of a surname.

With the advent of British colonialism, indigenous Africans in the so-called Anglophone Africa adopted the British system, with its heavily feudalistic flavor, and that is when it was assumed that a person’s Father’s name was his/her surname. This practice has come with a number of challenges. For example, in Kenya today, a man often uses his father’s name throughout school and college; but let him get married, and he suddenly takes up his own name which most of his peers and acquaintances had never heard of simply because his wife will under no circumstances accept her father-in-law’s name as
her “surname!” It would therefore be expedient to encourage such men to decide early which name to use to save us unnecessary confusion, as it often sounds as though one man, known by a certain name throughout school, college and early career life, is living with another man’s wife!

The issue of surnames in Africa brings to mind Kihumbu Thairu’s *The African Civilization* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975). In a section titled “Breeding Codes, Pedigrees and Social Stratification,” he wrote:

For people with a feudal mentality like the British, a surname system is very important. From the surname you can trace the pedigree or breeding of a person the way you trace the breeding purity of a champion bull or a champion dog. If you are a Briton bearing the surname of Churchill, for example, all other people will know that you are no commoner, while if your surname is Jones or Smith you might as well be called Grassroots because all know that you are as common as grass. People of European extraction found our naming system complicated and therefore called it *primitive*. They preferred to impose on us their feudal breeding codes which they call family names or surnames (Thairu 1975, 170).

Thairu is emphatic that surnames are antithetical to the creation of egalitarian societies, and concludes:

As in education and housing we should…avoid creating in Africa a separate class of Africans to replace the colonialists. We should encourage the dignity of all people and the providing of equal opportunities for each generation to prove itself or fail without the handicap or the unfair advantage inherited from the foregoing generation in the shape of a label, a family name (Thairu 1975, 171).

In the light of the foregoing considerations, we resolved to give authors latitude to use whichever address they preferred in the course of their writing (“Odera Oruka” or “Oruka,”) but, in view of the need for consistency in the format of citations throughout the volume, to
use “Oruka” as his main name in the bracketed intext references and in the list of references at the end of each paper.

Finally, there is the question of how to treat Oruka’s views. As with other influential philosophers, there are those who handle his work with an inappropriate reverence that suggests that we ought not to question his ideas. Nevertheless, Oruka was a philosopher, not the leader of a personality cult. As such, the only way to keep his legacy alive is to engage frequently in a thoroughgoing interrogation of his positions in the light of the philosophical trends and socio-political realities that he confronted, as well as the new and old ones that we encounter. As we do this, we must endeavour to avoid the three main ways of mishandling text - mis-quotation, mis-interpretation, and mis-application. We hope that this volume will contribute towards the attainment of this noble goal.