H. Odera Oruka and the Question of Methodology in African Philosophy: A Critique [1]

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Odera Oruka Seventeen Years On

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of Henry Odera Oruka, a Kenyan philosopher, to the discourse on the problem of methodology in African philosophy. It interrogates the veracity

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of various critical reactions to Oruka's thesis on philosophic sagacity, as well as his rejoinders to some of them. The paper posits that in spite of the formidable critiques against philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy, there are still some aspects of it worthy of note. In building on the strengths of philosophic sagacity, the paper suggests a transition to the method of 'hermeneutico-reconstructionism' in contemporary African philosophy.

Key Words

Methodology, African philosophy, philosophic sagacity, hermeneutico-reconstructionism

Introduction

Academic African philosophy, as of today, has come of age. The debates that permeated the philosophical atmosphere in Africa during the past four decades actually brought about the demise of any controversy as to whether or not there is African philosophy (Balogun 2008, 103). With the continued publication of books, journals, conference proceedings and anthologies that define the various research concerns of African philosophers today, it is conceded in many quarters that the meta-philosophical controversies that dominated the debate about the existence of African philosophy in the 1960's through the 1970's to the mid 1980's have been resolved.

However, the demise of these meta-philosophical controversies has proved to be an inauguration of another meta-philosophical debate, namely, the problem of methodology in African philosophical discourse. Thus while the question, "Is there an African philosophy?" has culminated in the formulation of contemporary African philosophies, the fundamental question that remains unresolved, with growing controversy, is: "What is the appropriate methodological framework of research in African philosophy?"

The concern of this paper is not to revisit the issues that characterized the initial debate. Rather, the focus is the new meta-philosophical problem of methodology in African philosophy. Henry Odera Oruka is one of the prominent East African scholars who participated in the early debate on the existence of African philosophy, and whose later works contributed to the new meta-philosophical problem of methodology. His discussions on the problem of methodology in African philosophy center on what he called "philosophic sagacity".

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the basis and theoretical constitution of Oruka's approach to African philosophy. We seek to bring to focus Oruka's essential contribution to the African philosophical discourse. In addition, we interrogate the pool of criticisms against the method of philosophic sagacity on the one hand, and on the other, evaluate the success or otherwise, of Oruka's rejoinders to some of these objections.

The method of philosophic sagacity in African philosophy

Philosophic sagacity is one of the approaches to African philosophy. It was developed as a project for some ends, and later evolved as a go-between for the two dominant, though antagonistic approaches to African philosophy - the methods of ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy (Oruka 1990, 65). On the one hand, it sought to disprove the negative implication of ethnophilosophy (which is that there is the existence of African philosophy without identifiable African philosophical figures). On the other, it sought to affirm that indigenous sages meet the requisite features of philosophy as identified by advocates of the professional or universalist school in African philosophy.

Oruka is generally regarded not only as the progenitor of philosophic sagacity, but also as its rigorous defender. Other scholars who are in favour of this method are F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2002, 2006, 2008), C.S. Momoh (1985, 1988), and Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo (1997), albeit with some remarkable differences that will be pointed out subsequently.

The method of philosophic sagacity, in Godwin Azenabor's (2009) account, is also known as the conversation method in African philosophy. Philosophic sagacity is a term that describes a reflective evaluation of thought by an individual (not collective) African elder who is a repository of wisdom, knowledge and rigorous critical thinking (Azenabor 2009, 16). The method attempts to document and articulate the views of indigenous African individuals reputed for their exceptional wisdom and independent critical musings, with the aim of presenting such ideas as authentic African philosophy.

Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2008) highlights the relevance of philosophic sagacity to modern African nation-states, despite its anchorage in traditional Africa. He notes that Oruka sought to prove that African philosophy does not begin in modern Africa; that even in traditional

Africa there were individuals who were capable of critical, coherent and independent thinking (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2008, 98). Oruka (1997, 181) himself said that "sage philosophy started as a reaction to a position Europeans had adopted about Africa that [traditional] Africans are not capable of philosophy." So Oruka's motivation was in part to counter this belief by showing the presence of rigorous thinking among indigenous Africans using the thoughts of selected traditional Kenyans as examples. Oruka (1997, 182) seeks to identify African philosophy in the technical sense among traditional sages, who according to him have no modern formal education and who have little or no Western intellectual influence, but whose reflective acumen is no less philosophical, no less rational, and no less deep than what is taken as philosophy in classical Europe.

Thus philosophic sagacity is a kind of individualized approach, characterized by the conviction that the actual sources and agents of knowledge and values in a given society are its sages and not the entire community. But what conception of sage does Oruka have in mind? In his earlier essays, he had defined a sage simply as a person "versed in the wisdoms and traditions of his people" (Oruka 1983, 386). However, in a later work, he identified the ethical quality to be an explicit and necessary component of the definition. This, he thought, would underscore the practical aspect of philosophic sagacity. The thoughts of the sages must be seen primarily as concerned with the ethical and empirical issues, and questions relevant to the society, and the sage's ability to offer insightful solutions to some of those issues. He is unequivocal that a sage has two qualities, namely, insight and ethical inspiration:

> A sage is wise; he has insight, but employs this for the ethical betterment of the community. A philosopher may be a sage and vice versa. But many philosophers do lack the ethical commitment and inspiration found in the sage […]. A sage, proper, is usually the friend of truth and wisdom. A sage may suppress truth only because wisdom dictates not because of some instrumental gain. Indeed, Pythagoras' definition of a philosopher as the 'lover of wisdom' should have been reserved for a sage, since the sophists were the grave-diggers of wisdom and truth. Socrates was wrongly labeled, 'philosopher'; he was first and foremost a sage. Socrates used philosophy only as a means to advance his sagacity and expose the hypocrisies of his time. But when all is said, one must still emphasize that sagacity and philosophy are not incompatible (Oruka 1991, 9-10).

Following the excerpt above, we can say that sages are individuals whose wisdom is seen as transcending that of the community, going beyond their acknowledged vast factual knowledge to their supposedly inborn capability of critical reflection. Perceived in that way,

sages are taken not just as knowledgeable individuals, but also as selected rational and critical thinkers whose opinions and recommendations are tacitly and commonly accepted and respected. Sharing this opinion is C.S. Momoh, who notes that African elders reflect logically on their cultural experiences, and are intellectually alert, acute, and concerned, as were their Western counterparts, with the problems of man, nature, God and society (Momoh 1988, 36).

In this philosophical trend, sages get the status of formal 'community thinkers' (philosophers). Therefore, they are implicitly accredited as representatives or spokespersons of the community's culture, and the ones capable of making critical assessment of what the community takes (or has to take) for granted. Oruka indicates the intellectual constitution of a philosophically sagacious person:

> These are men and women (sages) many of whom have not had the benefit of modern education. But they are, nevertheless, critical, independent thinkers who guide their thoughts and judgments by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of the communal consensus. They are capable of taking a problem or a concept and offering a rigorous philosophical analysis of it, making clear rationally where they accept or reject the established or communal judgment on the matter (Oruka 1991, 11).

Oruka therefore rightly believed that one sure way of avoiding or at least downplaying the raging invasions of obnoxious foreign ideas and values impinging on African cultures is to grant the thoughts of the sages more intellectual and social spaces in contemporary Africa (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2008, 101).

It is common in philosophical circles today to use the terms 'sage philosophy' and 'philosophic sagacity' interchangeably as if they mean one and the same thing. Semantically, this is understandable, but from a philosophical standpoint it is inexcusable, since it is a reflection of a misreading of Oruka's writings. A perusal of his books and essays on philosophic sagacity shows that he assigns somewhat different shades of meaning to the two terms.

Philosophic sagacity consists of thoughts having or showing insight and good judgement. It is therefore thoughts of persons acknowledged as wise by their respective communities. In yet another sense, philosophic sagacity is a body of basic principles and tenets that underlie and

justify the beliefs, customs, and practices of a given culture. In-built in the second definition is the first, since it is the beliefs and thoughts of persons acknowledged as wise by their respective communities that in essence constitute the basis of that community's culture (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2002, 20). It is important therefore to take cognizance of the fact that philosophic sagacity and sage philosophy are interrelated. With regard to this distinction, Oruka asserts:

> Sage-Philosophy in my usage consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community ... Sage-Philosophy is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom (well-known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths) and didactic wisdom, an expounded wisdom and a rationalized thought of some given individuals within a community. While the popular wisdom is often conformist the didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set-up and the popular wisdom (Oruka 1990, 51).

Oruka believes that genuine philosophy can be produced by individuals who are not literate, and that this is no exception to traditional Africans. Indeed for him, the philosophy produced by such individuals would be easy to defend as authentic African philosophy because of their little or no influence by modern education and exposure to foreign philosophical ideas. Such individuals are regarded as philosophic sages. They are not only wise: they are not only proficient interpreters of the collective history, customs and traditions of their people, but, more importantly, are also capable of being rational and critical in understanding or solving the inconsistencies of their culture and coping with foreign encroachments on it (Azenabor 2009, 74).

Thus according to Oruka, philosophic sages are different from folk sages. While folk sages are wise and morally inclined, they are also die hard adherents of the prevailing common beliefs, customs and traditions of their communities (Oruka 1991, 178). On the other hand, philosophic sages transcend communal wisdom and are known for veering off from commonly accepted opinions and practices on rational grounds. Thus the folk sage, unlike his philosophic counterpart, operates squarely within the confines of his culture.

To illustrate the distinction between these two aspects of sage philosophy, Oruka contends that the thoughts of Ogotemmêli (a blind hunter, priest and sage from the Dogon community in Mali) reflect popular or folk wisdom, whereas those of Paul Mbuya Akoko (a paramount

chief and spiritual leader of the Luo people of Kenya) belong to philosophic sagacity. This is because:

> Ogotemmêli's text is given as the verbatim and faithful recitation of the beliefs common to his people, the Dogon. No attempt is made to assess the extent to which the sage himself has thoughts that transcend the communal Dogon wisdom. Mbuya's text is a mingling of an informal formulation of the traditional Luo beliefs and a critical objection to and, at times, a rational improvement on those beliefs (Oruka 1991, 34).

Given the above observations, it is quite clear that sage philosophy and philosophic sagacity are not exact synonyms. While it is true that all instances of philosophic sagacity belong to sage philosophy (as in Mbuya's case), not each and every instance of sage philosophy would qualify as philosophic sagacity: they could be instances of popular or folk sagacity (as is the case with Ogotemmêli's thoughts) (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2008, 104). Some of the names of Kenyan traditional philosophic sages mentioned by Oruka include: Njeru wa Kanyenje, Arap Baliach, Muganda Okwako, Simiyu Chaungo, Oruka Ranginya, Joash Walumoli and Oginga Odinga (Oruka 1991, 39-40).

Furthermore, philosophic sagacity is different from ethnophilosophy. It is an approach to African philosophy designed among other salient reasons to avoid the poignant criticisms bedeviling ethnophilosophy. In Oruka's account,

> It [philosophic sagacity] differs from ethnophilosophy in that it is both individualistic and dialectical: It is a thought or reflection of various known or named thinkers not a folk philosophy and, unlike the latter; it is rigorous and philosophical in the strict sense (Oruka 1990, 17).

In the passage above, Oruka makes a clear-cut distinction between philosophic sagacity and ethnophilosophy. He argues that ethnophilosophy implies that traditional Africa is free from (1) philosophic, rational discourse and (2), personalized philosophical activity; philosophic sagacity, on the other hand, proves the contrary. Herein lies the difference between philosophic sagacity and culture philosophy (mythos) (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2002, 22). Ethnophilosophy falls in the latter because it is a first order philosophy. Philosophic sagacity on the other hand is a second order philosophy (activity). With this distinction made, Oruka argues that a philosophic sage (also referred to as a sage philosopher) operates at a second

order level by producing "a system within a system, and an order within an order" (Oruka 1983, 386).

Ordinary sages (whom Oruka refers to as non-philosophic sages) are specialists in explaining and maintaining the first order of culture philosophy. They therefore operate within the confines of culture philosophy, i.e. within the first order. By implication, 'sage philosophy' has two wings of which 'philosophic sagacity' is one, the other being folk or popular sagacity. Folk sagacity can be equated with ethnophilosophy, while philosophic sagacity cannot. Both however fall within the broad category of sage philosophy.

Given this distinction, Oruka categorizes renowned ethnophilosophical pieces, namely, Claude Sumner's *Ethiopian Philosophy vol. 1*, and John O. Sodipo and Barry Hallen's *An African Epistemology: The Knowledge-Belief Distinction and Yoruba Thought*, as works in current African philosophical literature that deserve the label 'sage philosophy', though not philosophic sagacity (Oruka 1991, 46).

There is need for some further comments on Oruka's delineation of Hallen and Sodipo's work as sage philosophy. In Hallen and Sodipo's method, traditional thinkers, the *onisegun* (herbal practitioners) in particular, are brought into the enterprise of expounding and elucidating the traditional thought of an African people as authorities commanding respect in their own right. Hallen and Sodipo conceive of these traditional thinkers not as informants as is the case in the method of philosophic sagacity of Oruka, but rather as collaborative colleagues in the field of African philosophical research (Hallen and Sodipo 1997, 10).

But it may be asked, does Oruka in fact intend that the conversation take the form of a cooperative process between the philosophic sage and the professional philosopher, or are the roles of the sages limited to indigenous informants on philosophical matters? Does philosophic sagacity suggest collegiality just as the Hallen and Sodipo methodic model? Oruka envisages the philosophic sage discussing freely, and, sometimes, exploring issues outside the scope of the questions posed by the interviewer. The philosophic sage is not merely an indigenous informant; rather, s/he thinks independently and critically, even challenging the core assumptions of the interviewer. On his part, the interviewer, who is the professional philosopher, has the duty not only to tape record all the details of the discussion,

but also, as a matter of methodical duty, to act as the provocateur of the sage (Oruka 1991, 31).

The method of philosophic sagacity is akin to that of Hallen and Sodipo, but quite distinct from it in the sense that while Oruka (1991) published translations of the discussions together with the names and even pictures of the concerned sages he interviewed, the duo of Hallen and Sodipo (1997) kept anonymous the identities of the traditional colleagues they worked with. This difference notwithstanding, both Oruka's method and that of Hallen and Sodipo necessarily involve empirical field work consisting of interviews, dialogues, recording, transcription and translation of the ideas of the indigenous resource persons.

Oruka says that interviews and dialogues are essential to philosophic sagacity (Oruka 1991, 30). The method is a joint venture between the ancient (traditional) and modern African philosophers (Azenabor 2009, 73). The task of the professional philosopher is to first identify a philosophic sage (as opposed to a folk sage). These sages are quite few in every traditional community, but they possess the philosophic inclination to make a critical assessment of their culture and its underlying beliefs.

Having identified such individuals, the task of the professional philosopher is to have dialogues with them on any philosophic theme. The method of philosophic sagacity therefore allows that the trained philosopher gives the form, style and taxonomy, while the sage gives the content (Falaiye 2007, 5). The content of the reflections of a philosophic sage, when documented by the professional philosopher, will serve as a product of authentic indigenous African philosophy, and as a foundation for more fruitful contemporary African philosophical reflections. Thus the essential role of the professional philosopher is that of an interlocutor in the process of prompting the latent ideas in the sages.

Some critical problems in Odera Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity

Criticisms commonly leveled against philosophic sagacity include methodological concerns similar to those raised in respect to ethnophilosophy. An additional methodological shortcoming concerns the fact that this philosophical trend was developed based on fieldwork carried out in just one setting, namely, the Kenyan rural areas. At the conceptual level, the

major concern lies in the fact that not all the reflections and questionings of the sages are necessarily philosophical (Hountondji 1976, 105).

Paulin J. Hountondji, who is one of the articulate critics of this method, contends that even the acclaimed independent critical disposition of indigenous sages, if any, would have only created an intellectual identity of African philosophers without an African philosophy. This point owes much to the absence of original transcriptions of their thoughts which would serve as a basis for their being integrated into a collective theoretical tradition:

> Thousands of Socrates could never have given birth to Greek philosophy, however talented they might have been in dialectics. So thousands of philosophers [sages] without written works could never have given birth to an African philosophy (Hountondji 1976, 106).

Thus for Hountondji, the fact of the existence of African philosophic sages does not necessarily establish, by its own very logic, the existence of African philosophy. The thoughts of the sages can only become part of the theoretical history of African philosophy when they are transcribed, discussed and criticized.

However, scholars such as Masolo have responded to this criticism by noting correctly that it is not true that literacy in and of itself does constitute a measurement or requisite condition for philosophizing (Masolo 2005, 24). Nevertheless, Masolo sees some problems in the conversational approach to African philosophy. Philosophy, according to him, is characterized by some form of tradition, that is, by a sustained discursive enquiry, and not by a simple expression of ideas (Masolo 2005, 22). In other words, the approach appears to limit the profundity of the philosophical enterprise to mere sagacious ability, which it is not. Masolo also notes that "Oruka's idea of the sages as philosophically savvy in their own languages raises methodical questions as to whether sage philosophy is the property of the professional philosopher, or of the indigenous wise person, and only teased out through the prompting of a professional philosopher" (Masolo 2008).

Gail Presbey's criticism of philosophic sagacity is closely related to Masolo's. According to her, philosophy is more of a commitment to inquiry than to answers or conclusions. She asserts that "the sages in so far as they are the 'answer men' [they] do not demonstrate the love of inquiry we require in a philosopher" (Presbey 1996, 38). A philosopher, Presbey (1996, 38) observes, "is not he/she who 'has the answer', but he/she who enjoys 'discussing the questions'." In fact, Masolo notes that the possession of a philosophical ability by any

sage is not enough to establish an authentic, indigenous and organized tradition of African philosophy if the identified sage does not engage with other sages in organized systematic reflections on the said thoughts, beliefs, worldviews and practices (Masolo 1994, 239).

Philosophic sagacity has also been charged with doing ethno-philosophy and social anthropology, both of which utilize oral literature and the interview method. For Bodunrin, the method is more of putting words in the mouths of informants and coming out with a refined story about a view. This whole exercise, writes Bodunrin, is un-philosophical since one does not have to go to the field to interview people in order to do philosophy (Bodunrin 1981, 168). The point here is that prominent philosophical figures in the West did not interview their people before they wrote what is known as German philosophy, French philosophy, or English philosophy, among others. As such, this method of going through villages with questionnaires and tape recorders is making African philosophy tread the methodic path of the sciences. Furthermore, it is bound to face the problem of correctness in translation from the indigenous language of the philosophic sage to a metropolitan language.
Besides, both Sophie Oluwole (1997) and Jay Van Hook (1995) expressed some reservations against the veracity of the method and principles of philosophic sagacity. The fundamental problem with sage philosophy, according to Oluwole (1997, 159), is that Oruka failed to draw a clear distinction between an ancient tradition of African philosophy and the contemporary emergent one. The problem, which Van Hook sees in the method of philosophic sagacity, has to do primarily with the classification in sage philosophy. This problem, according to him, relates to the distinction between folk or ordinary sages and philosophic sages. Van Hook (1995, 58) notes that the criteria for such a classification although clear in theory, are blurred in practice. This is so when we realize that during conversations with the professional philosopher, the sage is unaware of Oruka's distinction between folk and didactic sages.

For Bruce Janz, Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity is not really an instance of the Socratic dialogue. This is because the philosophic sage and the trained philosopher are not intellectual peers. The conversation presupposes an unequal power relationship: one does not get the sense that the dialogue partners are working cooperatively toward the truth (Janz 1998, 68). He notes further that the sage may not have thought about some issues until the interviewer raises them in a question and dialogue form (Janz 1998, 66).

Johnson Clarence (2008-2009) queries philosophic sagacity on the ground that it is reactionary and conservative, in that it upholds the patriarchal nature and values of most traditional African societies where men are the "voices" of tradition. Notice that the advocates of sagacity (both Oruka and Ochieng'-Odhiambo) conveniently avoided stating that African sages are invariably men. Besides, because age is a premium in African traditions, with the consequence that African elders are immunized from criticism and thus cannot be challenged especially if they are the supposed custodians and defenders of African customs and traditions, all philosophic sagacity does is to promote what Clarence characterizes as "a dogma of gerontocratic wisdom" (Clarrence 2008-2009, 67).

Moreover, the present author is of the view that there is the problem of traditionality and indigenous authenticity of the ideas of the sages. In view of the increasing interconnectedness and trans-cultural influences of one culture over the other, the alien over the natives and vice versa in the current age of globalization, the idea of indigenous authenticity becomes more of a fiction.

In defense of the method of philosophic sagacity

Some of the criticisms above did not go unchallenged by Oruka in his later writings. C.S. Momoh (1988) also responded to some of them. Before examining Oruka's rejoinders, let us consider Momoh's defense of the method of sage philosophy, which he called "Ancient African philosophy".

On the charge that philosophy cannot be done by the method of field research, Momoh (1988, 30) notes that we should recognize the difference between doing speculative philosophy and researching into speculative philosophy. The African sage uses the arm-chair method of doing philosophy, but the scholar who wants to document such a philosophy must use the methods of "material science". Both library research and field work, he opines, are legitimate avenues for finding out what other people think. Just as the scholar who goes into the library to do research can concentrate on speculative works, so also can the fieldworker concentrate on philosophical material (Momoh 1988, 28). Momoh's point against Bodunrin's critique is that when a researcher uses the method of interview and that of science to acquire knowledge of an African sage philosophy, it does not follow that such a sage himself uses that method in

his philosophizing. At any rate, both library research and field work are legitimate ways of acquiring and documenting knowledge.

In response to the charge that the traditionality of his sages is questionable on the ground that they could not have been insulated from the growing Westernization of Africa, Oruka retorts:

> Some of these persons might have been partly influenced by the inevitable moral and technological culture from the West; nevertheless, their own outlook and cultural well-being remain basically that of traditional rural Africa. Except for a handful of them, the majority of them are "illiterate" or semi-illiterate (Oruka 1990, 28).

In an attempt to respond to Oruka's rejoinder and push this criticism further, Kibujjo M. Kalumba (2002), in his paper, "A critique of Oruka's philosophic sagacity", urges that Oruka himself supplies the information that enables the critic to undermine the claim of insignificant Western influence on the outlook of his sages, thereby endangering their traditionality. This probing of the extent of the Western or alien influence on the outlook of philosophic sages is quite instructive, because the same information also entails a way to undermine the bases of the sages' philosophic sagaciousness, thereby jeopardizing it as well. For Kalumba, it is not logically sound to retort that because the sages are not lettered, they are automatically insulated from Christian/Western ideas. For him, anyone familiar with the African terrain can testify that literacy is not the only way Western ideas are disseminated to the masses. The pulpit, radio, social workers, and government agents are all means by which Western values reach the people of the rural areas (Kalumba 2002, 35).

Oruka responded to the objections of some scholars such as Bodunrin (1981) and Masolo (1994), who had contested the status of philosophic sages as full-fledged, original philosophers and thus their suitability to represent original philosophers, pre-colonial African or otherwise. Masolo and Bodunrin, as earlier noted, maintained that the sages could not be given full credit for their sophisticated philosophical utterances, as these depended at least as much on the lead questions of the professional philosopher, which enhanced the sages' personal sagaciousness. For them, sage philosophy is at best a joint product of the sage and the interviewer.

In response to this criticism, Oruka argued that the professional philosopher merely provokes the sage to explicate what are already the sage's own implicit philosophical views, much the same way virtually every professional philosopher we credit with original views is provoked to explicate his or her philosophy by some other philosopher. He likens the role of the professional philosopher to that of a midwife who helps the sage give birth to his or her philosophy (Oruka 1990, 31, 47-48).

In an illuminating counter critique, Kalumba exposes the futility of Oruka's defense in settling the problem of the sages' representativeness. Kalumba imagines a hypothetical pristine traditional setting for the sages, where the sages themselves are expected to act as midwives to one another. He therefore raises two fundamental possibilities: could the sages, under such circumstances, still produce the sort of philosophically sophisticated ideas they manage to produce with the intervention of a Western-style philosopher? If they could, this would show that they were true, traditional, creative philosophers, since they would thereby have exhibited the capability to be productive, even within this paradigmatically traditional setting. But if they could not, this would be proof that, as truly traditional, the sages are not philosophic, since, left to their uncontaminated traditionality, they become philosophically impotent. In other words, the sages in non-literate cultures could not have produced 'strict' philosophy on their own without being prompted by professional philosophers. According to Kalumba, this second alternative, which carries the same possibility as the first, cannot be ruled out. As a consequence, he avers:

> Because the sagacity project cannot eliminate the second alternative, its claim that the sages combine traditionality with philosophical acumen will forever remain "stained" with indelible uncertainty. And, since the sages must possess both traditionality and philosophical acumen to represent pre-colonial African philosophers, the indelible uncertainty extends to their status as suitable representatives. Given the indelible uncertainty of their representativeness, philosophic sagacity can never be in a position to use its sages as decisive evidence for its overarching conclusion (Kalumba 2002, 42).

There is a strong tendency to see Kalumba's disjunctive syllogistic argument as validly veracious. But this becomes suspect upon further reflection, when it is realized that Kalumba's position is itself neither here nor there because even the likelihood of the second hypothetical situation that he envisions cannot overshadow the logical possibility of the truth of the first hypothesis. As a counter response to Kalumba, let us take science as a paradigmatic example. Progress in science is achieved by the way scientists are able to keep

their method by modifying/questioning certain assumptions about their hypotheses without rejecting the core principles of their method altogether. Suppose a method fails to give us the required results because of the changed cultural circumstances or any other reason: do we throw away the method altogether, or try to modify aspects of it so that it reflects the changes and consequently gives us better results?

Kalumba correctly observes that as a logical possibility, we may never find uncontaminated sages today nor a conscious philosophic sage who would ape the midwifery of Socrates among his rural settings; but does that make what the sages know about the African past and traditional forms of epistemologies, metaphysical dispositions and logical acumen any less important? We may ask further, what other better way exists for building on the method of philosophic sagacity and the transmission of indigenous philosophic ideas?

The way forward: Hermeneutico-reconstructionism

In spite of the formidable critiques of philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy, Oruka's pioneering attempt at a theoretical conception of the method as well as his demonstrative commitment to it in his later publications deserves some commendation. He aimed at demonstrating the existence of philosophy and individual critical thinkers in pre-colonial Africa, prior to contact with the West as part of the struggle for reason in Africa: this he succeeded to do.

However, there is a lesson from the avalanche of criticisms that have been raised against Oruka's philosophic sagacity, namely, that African philosophers should not rest on Oruka's methodic oasis in their search for a cogent methodological *sine qua non* to producing authentic and respected traditions of African philosophy. The development of African philosophy is contingent among other things on the fruit of sustained further systematic reflection on the issue of methodology beyond the wall delineated by Oruka. Innocent Asouzu's (2007) remark is apt in this regard:

> For African philosophy to progress, more works of more broad-based systematic methodological type need to be done. Philosophy has never grown in any region by patchwork hit and run approach; it is the fruit of sustained systematic methodological reflection (Asouzu 2007, 59).

Consequently, we may ask: is it not possible to utilize Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity with slight modifications as a means of contributing to the progress of contemporary African philosophy? Today a more pressing issue beyond the meta-philosophical controversies of the existence of philosophers in ancient Africa (which the method of philosophic sagacity has solved) is that of salvaging indigenous epistemologies threatened with extinction, and bringing forth Africa's own contribution to the global knowledge landscape in pursuit of a polycentric global epistemology. We may ask, in pursuit of this new goal, how Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity could be modified, if it was to be employed in reconstructing indigenous philosophies in Africa so that they could meet the demands of postmodernity without attenuating the indigenous intellectual heritage.

I think the answer to this fundamental question can be found in what I would call the 'method of hermeneutico-reconstructionism' - a novel methodological model in African philosophy which rationally integrates the strengths of the method of cultural reconstructionism and the method of cultural hermeneutics. Godwin Azenabor (2004) uses the coinage 'cultural reconstructionism' to refer to Kwasi Wiredu's methodological disposition in African philosophy. This method combines due reflection on indigenous African languages, oral tradition and culture, conceptual elucidation, comparative criticism and reconstruction of emerging ideas without attenuating the exploitation of the literary and scientific resources of the modern world in pursuit of a synthesis (Wiredu 1992/93, 36). Grounding this method in his programme of conceptual decolonization, Wiredu thinks a rich tradition of modern African philosophy can be developed and sustained if there is reconstruction of the philosophical elements in African culture and the foreign influences for the benefit of contemporary African living.

The method of hermeneutics, though of Western origin, is used in African philosophy to refer to an approach that seeks a deeper understanding of Africa's cultural intellectual heritage such as symbols, oral tradition, language and history through careful interpretation of the socio-historical context that produced them (Okere 1982, p.ix). In establishing a rational connection between the past and the present ideas nested in historical, linguistic and cultural horizons of meaning, the hermeneutic approach exposes hidden meanings of supposedly lost thoughts, and provides deeper interpretation of indigenous ideas. It uses mythological narratives and oral traditions as its objects for rigorous interpretation. As an approach in

contemporary African philosophy, the method has the goal of retrieving the authentic philosophical heritage of Africa.

Hermeneutico-reconstructionism seeks to utilize the strengths in the methods of cultural reconstructionism and hermeneutics respectively. It does not interpret the African intellectual heritage for its own sake; rather, it seeks to deploy such interpretation for solving current problems. Hermeneutico-reconstructionism aims at meeting the dual challenge of harmonizing traditional techniques of philosophy with the cultural challenge of authenticity of philosophical rumination that is African in orientation through interpretation and application of indigenous ideas for meaningful contemporary existence. Such an orientation is not strictly defined with reference to affirming the uniqueness of African identity in terms of the usual logic of Afrocentrism. Rather, the objective of hermeneutico-reconstructionism is the African contributions to a polycentric global epistemology.

The method of hermeneutico-reconstructionism entails the creation/formulation of a contemporary African philosophy that recognizes, identifies and explains the intellectual foundation of ancient African philosophies upon which specific ideas, beliefs and principles in oral tradition can be demonstrated (and interpreted) as critical and rational, while at the same time trying to explore the potential of some humanistic aspects of the techno-scientific and philosophic resources of other cultural traditions to contribute towards the creation of a contemporary decolonized African system.

In modifying and thinking beyond the horizon of Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity as simply a technique of information exchange between the philosophic sage and the professional philosopher, the method of hermeneutico-reconstructionism comes in handy. The meanings of the indigenous ideas and concepts expressed by the philosophic sage should be hermeneutically interpreted, preferably in the indigenous language of the interviewee. Muyiwa Falaiye shares this view when he suggests that philosophic sages should be heard directly without the luxury of an 'interpreter'. For him, it would be enthralling to leave the ideas of the sages in the languages in which they expressed them, without the luxury of translation (Falaiye 2007, 70). There is a point in Falaiye's suggestion, because the loss of the true meaning of the ideas and words employed by the interviewed philosophic sages in the

process of transcription and translation cannot be glossed over if authentic African philosophy is to be achieved.

The imperative to reconstruct the ideas expressed by philosophic sages after they have been hermeneutically examined by contemporary professional African philosophers arises from the need to make those ideas existentially relevant to modern and postmodern African worlds. Reconstructionism entails probing the fundamentals in the thoughts of philosophic sages and the traditional African body of thought, not with the aim of romanticizing the conceptual and cultural beliefs therein or gullibly idolizing anachronistic, authoritarian and supernatural elements whether in our indigenous cultures or those external to us. Rather, it emphasizes the social commitments of African philosophical scholarship, without an attenuation of theoretical rigour. The method involves a comparative analysis and criticism of indigenous African ideas and those from other philosophical traditions, with the aim of remodeling them for reasonable contemporary African use.

Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity, which is anchored on the idea of a 'philosophic sage', has the consequence of laying emphasis on the status of the author of any particular idea, rather than on the idea itself. On the other hand, in hermeneutico-reconstructionism, while the author is not discountenanced entirely, the emphasis is more on the interpretation of the ideas and their import on the meaning of lived experiences in contemporary Africa. The hermeneutico-reconstructionist approach also overcomes the problem of the increasing scarcity of genuine traditional sages, which Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity is in principle fraught with. If philosophic sagacity continues to restrict itself to the views of traditional sages, the eventual demise of all the genuine indigenous sages may spell the extinction of the approach. On the other hand, hermeneutico-reconstructionism does not lay emphasis on the philosophic sages; rather, it focuses on philosophical thought wherever it may be found, be it in African oral tradition, African youth, African women, urban Africans or from non-African cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the method of hermeneutico-reconstructionism is a complementary improvement on philosophic sagacity. A further defense of this method is attempted elsewhere (Fayemi 2013).

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