

Philosophic sagacity

A classical comprehension and relevance to post-colonial social spaces in Africa

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Résumé: De la sagacité philosophique: Compréhension classique et relevance pour les espaces postcoloniales en Afrique. Des quatre tendances ou approches identifiées en philosophie africaine par H. Odera Oruka, à savoir l'ethnophilosophie, la sagacité philosophique, la philosophie idéo-nationaliste et la philosophie professionnelle, il y a lieu de relever que la sagacité philosophique a été la moins présente dans les discours et pratiques intellectuelles philosophiques en philosophie africaine. Un facteur majeur qui pourrait peut-être expliquer cet état de choses est que la sagacité philosophique n'a pas été correctement comprise. Pourtant, au contraire, la sagacité philosophique a un rôle significatif à jouer dans la solution aux problèmes sociopolitiques et réalités qui ont embrouillé les États-Nations d'Afrique. Cette dernière remarque forme le soubassement de la première rationalité de cette essai. Précisément l'essai réexamine la sagacité philosophique en retraçant ses origines et préoccupations. Parallèlement, l'essai clarifie aussi la distinction entre les deux termes liés linguistiquement, à savoir la « philosophie sage » et la « sagacité philosophique ». Quelques-uns de ceux qui ont exprimé verbalement leur vues ou qui ont écrit sur la sagacité philosophique ont souvent utilisé les deux termes comme synonymes au détriment des objectifs et buts pourtant clairs de la sagacité philosophique. Ceci constitue le fondement de la deuxième thèse de cet essai.

Abstract: Philosophic sagacity: A classical comprehension and relevance to post-colonial social spaces in Africa. Of the four trends in, or approaches to, African philosophy identified by H. Odera Oruka namely ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy and professional philosophy; it is philosophic sagacity that has been given the least space in intellectual philosophical discourses and practices on African philosophy. Perhaps, a major contributing factor in this regard could be that it has not been adequately comprehended, or simply misunderstood. Yet, on the contrary, philosophic sagacity has a significant role to play in resolving some social-political problems and realities that have bedevilled African nation-states. Herein lies one rationale of this essay. The essay revisits philosophic sagacity by tracing its origins and concerns. At the same time, the essay also clarifies

the distinction between the two linguistically related terms 'sage philosophy' and 'philosophic sagacity'. Some of those who have said or written something on sagacity in African philosophy have often used them synonymously at the expense of the clear objectives and aims of the latter. Herein is to be found another rationale of the essay.

Mots clefs: Odera Oruka, sagacité philosophique, racines philosophiques de la culture, naïveté philosophique, moralité technologique, sagacité populaire, ethnophilosophie, école de philosophie professionnelle.

Key words: Odera Oruka, philosophic sagacity, philosophical roots of culture, philosophical naivety, technological morality, folk sagacity, ethnophilosophy, professional school.

Introduction

As an approach to African philosophy, philosophic sagacity made its maiden appearance in international philosophical discourse in 1978 during the commemoration of Dr. Anthony William Amo¹ Conference held in Accra, Ghana. This was by way of Kenyan philosopher H. Odera Oruka's presentation titled 'Four Trends in Current African Philosophy'. The following year, Odera Oruka read a slightly different version of the essay during the 16th World Congress of Philosophy in Dusseldorf, Germany. The essay has been seminal in academic African philosophy. Besides the essay, Odera Oruka authored several others, including two texts, in the area of African philosophy most of them focussing on philosophic sagacity. It is therefore not surprising that he is generally regarded not only as the icon of philosophic sagacity, but its progenitor as well.

As is the case with the other approaches to African philosophy, philosophic sagacity has had its share of critics. However, this essay does

¹ Amo was born in present-day Ghana in 1703. At the tender age of four years, he was in Amsterdam possibly as a slave though other possibilities have been offered as well. Whatever the case might have been, while in Europe, he exhibited great intellectual élan, successfully undertaking undergraduate and graduate studies in various fields of study namely law, medicine, psychology, and philosophy. He later taught at the universities of Halle and Jena in what is now the Federal Republic of Germany, and published several philosophical works. He returned to his native land in Ghana in 1753 and died soon thereafter.

not seek to directly address some of these specific criticisms. It is a general disquisition on philosophic sagacity meant to give an accurate exegesis and account of the approach. Many may be under the false impression that the approach found its way into the philosophical arena in the early 1980s.² Others may query its relevance beyond proving the obvious that sages existed or exist in traditional Africa. Yet still, some may wonder what sets it apart from ethnophilosophy. Such impressions, queries, and wonders may be made redundant by a proper understanding of philosophic sagacity. In its specificity, this essay has three objectives. These are: (1) To trace and enunciate the origins of philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy in academic intellectual discourse. (2) To highlight its relevance to modern African nation-states, despite its anchorage in traditional Africa. (3) To decipher the distinction between philosophic sagacity and sage philosophy, given that too often, some individuals have definitively, though at times mistakenly, used the two terms interchangeably.

Origins of Philosophic Sagacity: Odera Oruka's Two Research Projects

Despite the fact that philosophic sagacity was pronounced to the international community in 1978, many seem not to be aware that Odera Oruka had actually started work on it a couple of years earlier in his two, though related, research projects, one in 1974 and the other in 1976. In other words, though he first employed the term 'philosophic sagacity' in his 1978 essay, it is apparent that his 1974 and 1976 projects were exercises in philosophic sagacity. The two research projects therefore rightfully demarcate the origins of philosophic sagacity. Hence, contrary to conventional belief, the birth year of philosophic sagacity within academia pre-date 1978. Knowledge of this fact, as will be apparent below, is fundamental in that it not only enhances the general comprehension of the

² This is because, though H. Odera Oruka read the paper 'Four Trends in Current African Philosophy' in 1978, it was only published in 1981.

approach but also highlights its significance to the social-political realities of modern Africa.

In 1974, together with some of his colleagues at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, notable among them the charismatic philosopher and theologian Joseph Donders, Odera Oruka formulated a research project at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. It was entitled 'Thoughts of Traditional Kenyan Sages'. At its inception, the immediate aim of the project was to address the following question:

Would it be possible to identify persons of traditional African culture, capable of the critical, second-order type of thinking about the various problems of human life and nature; persons, that is, who subject beliefs that are traditionally taken for granted to independent rational re-examination and who are inclined to accept or reject such beliefs on the authority of reason rather than on the basis of a communal or religious consensus?³

In 1976, Odera Oruka designed yet another related research proposal of national and social significance. On the face of it, the project appeared rather ambitious given the enormity of its attendant implications in terms of duration and resources necessary for the fulfillment of its objectives. The project was titled 'The Philosophical Roots of Culture in Kenya'. In the proposal, researches were initially meant to cover the Western part of Kenya. The ultimate objective however was:

To uncover and map out the philosophical ideas which underlie some of the main cultural practices of Western Kenya. This would be treated as a regional investigation which, if co-ordinated and supplemented with researches from other parts of the Republic would provide an over all [sic] pattern of the Philosophy of Kenyan National Culture.⁴

The objective of the 1976 research proposal was premised on two assumptions.

First, philosophy is always the moving spirit and the theoretical framework of

³ H. Odera Oruka, 'African Philosophy: The Current Debate' in H. Odera Oruka, ed; *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991, p. 17.

⁴ H. Odera Oruka, 'The Philosophical Roots of Culture in Kenya', unpublished research proposal presented to the Ministry of Culture and Social Services, Government of Kenya, 1976, p. 8.

any national culture. Any serious and meaningful national culture must have a philosophy. Second, because Kenya as a State is struggling tirelessly to ground itself permanently as a nation – and a national culture is always the axis of a nation.⁵

Given the gist of the two research projects one cannot fail to fathom that they were exercises in what Odera Oruka later christened ‘philosophic sagacity’. The 1974 project sought to identify philosophic sages, whereas the 1976 one was geared towards engaging their thoughts for the sake of social cohesion and national prosperity.⁶

Significance of the Two Research Projects

(a) The 1974 Project

The late 1960s through to the 1970s was a turbulent period for African philosophy. It was the period that African philosophy was attempting to ground itself in mainstream academic philosophy. Prior to this era, and also during the period, discussions regarding what African philosophy was, was dominated by views that had been expressed in Placide Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959)⁷; Alexis Kagame’s *La Philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l’être* (Bruxelles: Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1956); Léopold S. Senghor’s *On African Socialism* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964); Marcel Griaule’s *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Robin Horton’s ‘African Traditional Religion and Western Science’, *Africa*, vol. 37, nos. 1 and 2, 1967; and John S. Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969). The ground, however, had been set

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ The spirit of the 1976 research project is also discernible in H. Odera Oruka’s later essay titled ‘Sagacity in Development’ in H. Odera Oruka, ed; *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, pp. 57-65.

⁷ The text was originally written in Dutch titled *Bantoe-filosofie*. The first French version titled *La Philosophie bantoue* was published in 1945, and the first English translation, by Rev. Colin King, was published in 1959.

by the French anthropologist L. Lévy-Bruhl, whose text *Primitive Mentality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1923) had achieved certain notoriety for its hostility towards the African mind and also for its attendant ideological pretensions. The views contained in the texts crystallized in what later became known as ethnophilosophy, 'the study of collective forms of culture as manifestations of African philosophical systems'.⁸

Paulin Hountondji, the fiercest critic of ethnophilosophy, saw it as ethnological works with philosophical pretensions.⁹ Generally, the critics of ethnophilosophy were displeased with its ambiguous use of the term 'philosophy'. When applying it to Africa, ethnophilosophers use it in the ideological sense. Hountondji, for instance, noted that:

Words do indeed change their meanings miraculously as soon as they pass from the Western to African contexts [...]. That is what happens to the word 'philosophy': applied to Africa, it is supposed to designate no longer the specific discipline it evokes in its Western context but merely a collective world-view, an implicit spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere. This is a vulgar usage of the word, justified presumably by the supposed vulgarity of the geographical context to which it is applied.¹⁰

The Malawian philosopher, Didier N. Kaphagawani, on his part, observes that given the suppositions and underpinnings of ethnophilosophy, some philosophers justifiably see it as 'simply a constitution of both schemes of conduct and schemes of thought (not a philosophy)'.¹¹ African philosophy was presented by the ethnophilosophers as atypical, as a remarkable unanimity with no dissenting voice; it was a philosophy without philosophers.

It is against this backdrop that the so-called professional school as

⁸ Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo, eds., *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 4.

⁹ Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ Didier N. Kaphagawani, 'The Philosophical Significance of Bantu Nomenclature' in Guttorm Fløistad, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, vol. 5, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, p. 130.

an approach to African philosophy emerged. The school sensed some promiscuity in the use of the word 'philosophy' by the ethnophilosophers, whom to them were using it pejoratively and in service of the Western world.¹² To these scholars, African philosophy was not what the ethnophilosophers portrayed it to be, at least not in its totality. According to them, it was wrong to dress African philosophy essentially in traditionalism or communal folk thought. Just like Western philosophy, African philosophy was supposed to be seen from the professional and academic angle also. It had to involve critical, discursive and independent thinking as well.

However, notwithstanding the noble intentions of the professional school, it caused discomfort to others in two ways. (1) It was argued that what the school was referring to, as African philosophy was not purely African. The professional philosophers having basically studied Western philosophy and hardly anything about African philosophy treated African philosophy from a typically Western standpoint. They employed Western logic and principles to criticize and create what they like to call African philosophy.¹³ The end result of what they qualified, as African philosophy was in essence a scholarly exercise rooted in the West. (2) Though the professional school granted the existence of African philosophy in the technical and proper sense, it limited itself to modern Africa, giving the impression that traditional Africans were incapable of technical philosophy.

In the two observations noted above lies the rationale of Odera

¹² See for example, Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996; Peter O. Bodunrin, 'The Question of African Philosophy', *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 56, no. 216, April 1981; F. Eboussi Boulaga, 'Le Bantou problematique', *Présence Africaine*, no 66, 1968; Marcien Towa, *Essai sur la problematique philosophie dans l'Afrique actuelle*, Yaounde: Clé, 1971; and to some extent Franz Crahay, 'Le Décollage conceptuel: conditions d'une philosophie bantoue', *Diogenes*, no. 52, 1965.

¹³ H. Odera Oruka, ed., *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*, Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990, p. 19.

Oruka's 1974 research project. Regarding the second observation, the project sought to prove that African philosophy does not begin in modern Africa; that even in traditional Africa there are individuals who are capable of critical, coherent and independent thinking. On the first observation, it sought to identify African philosophy in the technical sense as seen through African spectacles, that is, as portrayed by Africans with little or no Western intellectual influence.¹⁴ In a way therefore, besides disproving the suppositions of ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity also came in as a rescue package meant to salvage the professional school.

(b) The 1976 Project

In the 1976 proposal, Odera Oruka identified, what he referred to as, philosophical naivety as the problem that was posing a great threat and danger to the development of authentic national culture in modern Kenya, and indeed the rest of Africa. Philosophy in the usual sense is sometimes naively regarded as the heritage of the Greeks and thus treated as a typical European activity with the result that Africans are regarded as innocent of true philosophical thought and discourse. As already noted above, this also explained the hostility of the professional school towards ethnophilosophy. Because of the view that confines philosophy to the West many people who have had to write or say something on African philosophy have done so with remarkable naivety. They have argued that African culture and its philosophy are a lived experience, not a myriad of concepts to be pictured and rationalized by the mind. Thus, they see philosophy in Africa as an inseparable part of the concrete, of culture as Africans feel and live it and not an entity to be isolated and discussed. As a detailed activity and exercise, philosophy, has, according to this position, no place in African culture.

The underlying assumptions of Odera Oruka's 1976 proposal was that any genuine and concrete national culture should be identical with the unifying or common patterns of the general way of life of a people

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

living as a community or believed to have the same identity. Accordingly, a national culture must have two aspects: practical and theoretical. Things such as music, dance, and fashion make up the practical aspect. The theoretical aspect is formed by the philosophy (principles and ideas) that justifies such activities. A culture without a clear philosophy is incomplete, or as Kwame Nkrumah puts it, 'practice without thought is blind'.¹⁵ Such a culture is therefore blind and hence vulnerable to every foreign values and ideas, no matter how obnoxious the foreign values may be. This is one of the biggest threats to the various African cultures. One sure way of avoiding the invasion of foreign ideas is for a nation to develop and articulate the philosophy of its culture. One cannot fight for or defend ideas by use of guns; one can only successfully fight for or defend ideas with ideas.

Philosophical naivety is preposterous. Taking philosophy as tenets that underlie practice and action, the truth is that Africa must, as any other place, have philosophical principles that justify and govern its cultural practice. It is only that in Africa these principles are mostly covert and left at the implicit level. These principles must be unearthed and made explicit since they are the basis upon which a concrete and meaningful national culture would be built. This, according to Odera Oruka, was and still is the great challenge facing African scholars and cultural conservationist today. They should

'investigate and unearth such principles. This is necessary for posterity and for the development of a national culture. This investigation should be part of the national programme in every African State'.¹⁶

For the sake of posterity and prosperity, Odera Oruka later added another dimension to the role that sagacious reasoning could play in the development of national cultures and social cohesion in various modern

¹⁵ Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonisation and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution*, London: Panaf Books, 1970, p. 78.

¹⁶ H. Odera Oruka, 'The Philosophical Roots of Culture in Kenya', unpublished research proposal presented to the Ministry of Culture and Social Services, Government of Kenya, 1976, p. 8.

African nation-states. Sagacious reasoning is not just reasoning for the sake of reasoning. He noted with dismay that philosophy especially in the academic understanding of the term, has tended to estrange itself from the 'Socratic' partnership with wisdom with the result that philosophers have proceeded in a manner in which they perfect their reasoning skills without caring about, or at the expense of, its practical utility. They have become too theoretical and have tended to divorce philosophy from society, and study the subject in a vacuum. Little wonder, some non-philosophers view philosophers with lots of suspicion. They are considered as individuals who are stuck to their armchairs in ivory towers dreaming dreams that cannot be lived. They are perceived as people who cannot say anything sensible concerning problems of life.¹⁷ This is an unfortunate state of affairs and is a challenge to all philosophers worth their salt, for in truth, philosophy is after all for life and not the vice versa.

In all seriousness, the general project of philosophic sagacity is an effort to bring back some of the lost glory of philosophy by emphasizing on sagacious reasoning or wisdom. In his earlier essays, Odera Oruka had defined a sage simply as a person 'versed in the wisdoms and traditions of his people'.¹⁸ However, in a later work, he attaches the ethical quality as 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 or attributes,

insight and ethical inspiration. So 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 be-

¹⁷ See H. Odera Oruka, 'Philosophy and Other Disciplines' in Anke Graness and Kai Kresse, eds., *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in Memoriam*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 1957, p. 35.

¹⁸ H. Odera Oruka, 'Sagacity in African Philosophy', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1983, p. 386.

cause 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.¹⁹

Odera Oruka therefore rightly believed that if the thoughts of the sages were granted more intellectual and social spaces in modern Africa, then that would be one sure way of avoiding or at least downplaying the raging invasions of obnoxious foreign ideas and values impinging on African cultures. Take for example what may be called technological morality. It is a morality in which technological innovations are preponderant and are objects of worship. It is a genre of morality in which technological superiority or efficiency is identified with the good. What is technologically possible and fitting is treated as also being morally permissible. And the bad is that which lags behind technological advancement. Thus, for instance, if abortion is medically possible and safe (a reflection of advance technology), then it is treated as also being morally all right for a woman to abort.

In Africa today, it is increasingly becoming acceptable that to be good or beautiful is to have technological fashion on one's side. In a manner of speaking, a beautiful lady, for example, is no longer she who relies on her natural built. She is one who dresses fashionably and decorates her innocent body with cosmetic trappings: thanks to technology. And the handsome man is he who owns what the latest technology has in store. To him, ladies will be attracted as flies are to a rotten body. Love and marriage are becoming material at the expense of spirituality. The question is not just, how one can love one's partner and enrich the marriage or relationship spiritually, but what one can materially benefit from the relationship. This could very well be one of the reasons why divorce is spiraling out of control in the modern world in general. Technological morality is thus dangerous to African societies because in truth it deprives

¹⁹ H. Odera Oruka, 'Introduction', in H. Odera Oruka, ed; *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, pp. 9-10.

culture of morality in the proper and desirable sense. Sagacity, if well articulated, properly documented, and readily availed to community members especially in the urban areas, could thus act as check on technological morality as well as other undesirable foreign invasions. In emphasizing the important roles of sages, Odera Oruka asserts that:

Sages exist in all cultures and classes. Indeed, sages are among the custodians of the survival of their respective societies. A society without sages would easily get swallowed up as an undignified appendage of another. All societies use their sages or at least the ideas of their sages to defend and maintain their existence in the world of inter-societal conflict and exploitation.²⁰

Since Africa is today at a crossroads and under invasion by foreign cultural elements, there is an urgent need that the sages be accorded more prominent roles in their respective societies. Otherwise African cultures will end up getting swallowed up as undignified appendages of Western culture. The question of Africa being swallowed up, as an undignified appendage of the West has been a concern of several African scholars and statesmen, though the solutions they have offered has varied. Kwame Nkrumah, for example, called for a social revolution in the emergent independent African nation-states: a revolution in which African thinking and philosophy are directed towards the redemption of the African humanist society of the past. He believed that his notion of consciencism was best placed to achieve this. He defines it as:

The map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest Western and Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa, and develop them in such a way that they fit into the African personality. The African personality is itself defined as the cluster of humanist principles which underlie the traditional African society.²¹

What Philosophic Sagacity is Not

Some critics as well as proponents of Odera Oruka's approach to African

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²¹ Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonisation and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution*, p. 79.

philosophy commonly use the terms ‘sage philosophy’ and ‘philosophic sagacity’ interchangeably as if they mean one and the same thing. From a purely semantic point of view this is understandable, but from a philosophical angle, it is inexcusable since it is a reflection of misreading Odera Oruka. A perusal of his texts and essays on sagacity shows that he assigns somewhat different shades of meaning to the two terms. He does not use them synonymously.

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, 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. It is important therefore to take cognizance of the fact that sagacity and sage philosophy are synonyms given that the latter is described as:

The expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and 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 rational thoughts of some individuals within community). While popular wisdom is often conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set up and popular wisdom.²²

From the definition given above, it is apparent that sage philosophy has two facets: popular (or folk) sagacity and philosophic (or didactic) sagacity. The former consists of well-known communal maxims, aphorisms, and general common sense truths, whereas the latter is an expounded wisdom and rational thoughts of some given individuals within the community. The folk sage, unlike his philosophic counterpart, operates squarely within the confines of his culture. For him,

²² H. Odera Oruka, ‘Sage Philosophy: The Basic Questions and Methodology’ in H. Odera Oruka, ed; *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, p. 33.

Beliefs or truth-claims within culture are generally treated as 'absolutes' [not to be questioned]. Anything outside or contradictory to the culture is treated with indifference and even hostility. Those sages or persons who are [merely] experts in the culture defend this philosophy and the structure of their society with the zeal of fanatical ideologists defending the political line.²³

To illustrate the distinction between these two aspects of sage philosophy, Odera Oruka contends that the thoughts of Ogotemmêli reflect popular or folk wisdom, whereas those of Paul Mbuya Akoko 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.²⁴

Given the above, 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). Despite this distinction some scholars have commonly, though erroneously, continued to equate sage philosophy with philosophic sagacity.²⁵ And there is no doubt that this error has

²³ H. Odera Oruka, 'Sagacity in African Philosophy', in Tsenay Serequeberhan, ed; *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, New York: Paragon House, 1991, p. 52.

²⁴ H. Odera Oruka, 'Sage Philosophy: The Basic Questions and Methodology' in H. Odera Oruka, ed; *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, p. 34.

²⁵ See, for example, Anthony S. Oseghare, 'Sage Philosophy: A New Orientation' in H. Odera Oruka, ed; *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, pp. 237-246. Gail M. Presbey, 'Is Elijah Masinde a Sage?' in Anke Graness and Kai Kresse, eds; *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in Memoriam*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997, pp. 195-209. Patrick M. Dikirr, 'Sagacity in the Maasai Concept of Death and Immortality' in Anke Graness and Kai Kresse, eds; *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in Memoriam*, pp. 181-193. Chaungo Barasa, 'Odera Oruka and the Sage Philosophy School: A Tribute' in Anke Graness and Kai Kresse, eds; *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in*

been to the disservice of the narrower and more specific philosophic sagacity project for it has had negative ramifications and given critics an opportunity to equate sage philosophy with ethnophilosophy *in toto*, yet in actuality it is only the folk sagacity aspect that lends itself to ethnophilosophy. This equation contradicts Odera Oruka's thesis that philosophic sagacity 'is the only trend that can give an all-acceptable decisive blow to the position of ethno-philosophy'.²⁶

It is instructive to note that when Odera Oruka identified the four trends in African philosophy, he labeled them Ethno-philosophy, Philosophic Sagacity, Nationalist-ideological Philosophy, and Professional Philosophy.²⁷ And even when he added two more trends namely, Hermeneutical Philosophy, and Artistic or Literary Philosophy about a decade later in his edited text *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, he still talked of Philosophic Sagacity as one of the six trends, not Sage Philosophy. Why title the text Sage Philosophy but nevertheless still talk of philosophic sagacity as one of the trends? One may muse. The reason should not be difficult to gauge. In the 1970s when Odera Oruka formulated the two research projects, his aim was unmistakable. He wanted to prove the existence of critical independent thinkers in traditional Africa (1974 project), and also explicate a clear methodology upon which national unity could be attained and obnoxious foreign ideologies and values checked (1976 project). His endeavour in both instances pointed to sages who were didactic in their thinking. It is for this reason that Odera Oruka made a clear distinction between what he was doing from ethnophilosophy.

It [philosophic sagacity] differs from ethno-philosophy 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

Memoriam, pp. 19-22. Parker English and Kibujjo M. Kalumba, eds., *African Philosophy: A Classical Approach*, Upper Saddles River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.

²⁶ H. Odera Oruka, 'Sagacity in African Philosophy', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1983, p. 384.

²⁷ See H. Odera Oruka, 'Four Trends in Current African Philosophy' in Alwin Diemer, ed; *Philosophy in the Present Situation of Africa*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1981.

philosophical in the strict sense.²⁸

Odera Oruka believed that contrary to the aims of his two projects, ethnophilosophy was being applied in service of the Western world, not Africa.²⁹ His articles on African Philosophy written during this period express open hostility towards ethnophilosophy; the articles are polemical.³⁰

A careful reading of Odera Oruka's works on sagacity reveals that the term 'sage philosophy' appeared much later. He employed the term for the very first time in 'Philosophy in English Speaking Africa', a paper published in 1984.³¹ However, it was only in his text *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, first published in 1990, that he makes a deliberate distinction between 'sage philosophy' and 'philosophic sagacity'; a distinction which had escaped the eyes of many because of their semantic affinity. As already noted, the distinction lies in the fact that 'sage philosophy' has two wings of which 'philosophic sagacity' is one, the other being folk or popular sagacity. In his text *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*, also published in

²⁸ H. Odera Oruka, 'Four Trends in Current African Philosophy' in H. Odera Oruka, ed; *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*, Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990, p. 17. The essay was however first published in Alwin A. Diemer, ed; *Philosophy in the Present Situation of Africa*.

²⁹ For similar arguments, refer to Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996; Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, 'Philosophy and African Intellectuals: Mimesis of Western Classicism, Ethnophilosophical Romanticism, or African Self-Mastery', *Quest*, vol. v, no. 1, June 1991; Christian M. Neugebauer, 'Ethnophilosophy in the Philosophical Discourse in Africa', *Quest*, vol. iv, no. 1, June 1990; Christian M. Neugebauer, 'Hegel and Kant: A Refutation of their Racism', *Quest*, vol. v, no. 1, June 1991.

³⁰ See for example his essays 'Mythologies as African Philosophy', *East Africa Journal*, vol. 9, no. 10, October 1972; and 'The Fundamental Principles in the Question of 'African Philosophy' I', *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. iv, no. 1, 1975.

³¹ H. Odera Oruka, 'Philosophy in English Speaking Africa' in E. Agazzi, ed; *Nouva Secondaria*, no. 10, Roma 1984. Having established the existence of philosophic (didactic) sages in traditional Africa and also having laid the groundwork for his 1976 project, Odera Oruka saw no harm in delving in popular sagacity hence the coming into being of 'sage philosophy'.

1990, he goes on to equate folk sagacity with ethnophilosophy. Here he asserts that the thoughts of Ogotemmêli constitute folk sagacity besides being ethnophilosophical, in contrast to Paul Mbuya Akoko's which are philosophic.³² Both however fall within the broad category of sage philosophy. He also qualifies renowned ethnophilosophical pieces by Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy* vol. 1 and, John O. Sodipo and Barry Hallen '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.³³

³² H. Odera Orika, 'The Basic Questions about Sage Philosophy in Africa' in H. Odera Orika, ed; *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*, p. 52.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 52 and p. 69.

