

# AFRICAN SAGE PHILOSOPHY AND SOCRATES: MIDWIFERY AND METHOD

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## I. BACKGROUND: SEEKING AFRICA'S PHILOSOPHICAL VOICE

Considering the general lack of written sources for much of sub-Saharan Africa, how does one proceed if one is intent on collecting a tradition of African philosophical ideas that have not been influenced by Anglo-European thought? One way is to turn to the fruits of a long oral tradition, by mining the wisdom of the elders of this century, and by committing to writing the philosophical concepts and ideas handed down in this way. This idea was first attempted by a European missionary, Placide Tempels, who wrote *Bantu Philosophy*. Critical reviews of Tempels' method, dubbed "ethnophilosophy," abound. For example, H. Odera Orika notes that Tempels and other ethnophilosophers, in their zeal to represent traditional cultures, appointed themselves as spokespersons and "philosophicated" on behalf of the cultures, instead of letting the people speak for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Some African philosophers, like Professor Peter Bodunrin, want to agree with European critics of African philosophy, and admit that African philosophy is getting a "late start" in comparison with European philosophies. After all, there have not yet been organized systemic philosophical reflections by Africans themselves. H. Odera Orika, however, is not content to give in so easily, but he agrees that there has not been "organized, systematized reflections."

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Oruka's concern is that the Europeans are denying more than just that- they are denying that Africans have a practice of the critical use of reason. And so Oruka is intent on showing that the practice of critically evaluating received beliefs and traditions is, and has been, alive and well in Africa (TCAP 44-45).

Although there have not been many sub-Saharan philosophical texts, it does not follow that there has been no philosophy. One need only point out that Socrates never wrote anything to prove the point that there can be philosophers without written texts. Of course, we today would probably know little of Socrates if Plato hadn't written about him. There appear to have been centuries of an oral tradition of philosophical thought in Africa, passed from generation to generation, but we are without records to prove its existence. Of course, speculating on this likelihood is not the same as proving it to have been so.<sup>2</sup>

Many thinkers have lately been engaged in searching out the present generation of African wise men in order to record the accumulated wisdom of centuries. There are presently, to simplify, two related approaches. The first tries to find the commonalities between the ideas of members of the same ethnic group, and includes these findings with other related sources, such as language analysis and the study of oral literature. The other (the focus of this paper) emphasizes the distinct and personal ideas of individuals from a variety of ethnic groups.

## II. SAGE PHILOSOPHY: A MORE PROMISING APPROACH

H. Odera Oruka (deceased December 1995), a professor of philosophy at University of Nairobi, suggested a method, called "sage philosophy," for which he deserves the title of founder. Sage philosophy tries to record the wisdom and beliefs of individual East African

thinkers with sensitivity and accuracy not present in the earlier attempts. Since then some West African philosophers (for example, Anthony Oseghare of Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria) have been interested in the method as well.<sup>3</sup> Oruka claimed that sage philosophy is unlike the ethnophilosophy of Tempels, Mbiti, Ruch, Anywanyu, and others, in that it concentrates on the debate of philosophical ideas, and is not an anthropological study of any group's beliefs (TCAP 24). Oruka himself did not attempt to categorize or systematize a philosophical worldview of an entire culture in his own words, but rather, he encouraged sages to speak for themselves and then published the dialogues he had with them. His book, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*,<sup>4</sup> contains interviews of sages from several ethnic groups found in Kenya, and so does not attempt to be an exhaustive account of any one group's philosophy.

#### A. Personal Thought, Not Groupthink

Oruka emphasizes the ideas of unique and wise individuals, to show that critical thinking is a tradition in Africa. He is concerned that outsiders could misjudge African traditional communities by imagining that they are static and homogeneous or engaged in a kind of groupthink. Anthropologists reinforce this idea by interviewing many thinkers and then reporting only the common aspects of the diverse accounts. Ethnophilosophy practiced in Africa implicitly claims "that traditional Africa is a place of philosophical unanimity allowing no room whatsoever for a Socrates or Descartes (SP 1,19)."

Anthony Oseghare, an admirer of Oruka's sage philosophy method, is perhaps more zealous than Oruka himself. While clearly casting his allegiance with philosophy based in

culture rather than universal notions, he still states that philosophy is "not concerned with consensus or cozy unanimity of opinions." In fact, he insists that "a proper philosophical method cannot be arrived at through a simple matter of 'counting noses,' since this will leave things only at the *communal* level and philosophy is *personal*, i.e., a second-order activity" (SAP 97, emphasis in the original). According to his criteria, the work of Barry Hallen and Joseph Sodipo on Yoruba epistemology (based on interviews of "Onisegun" or masters of traditional medicine) is "incoherent" because, among other reasons, "it contains not a single example of *individual* philosophizing" (SAP 101, emphasis in the original). He therefore concludes that Oruka's methodology of gathering from the sages "their individual ratiocinative thoughts" holds the brightest future for building an African philosophy (SAP 101).

#### B. Method: Interview With A Sage

The methods of interviewing in sage philosophy are as follows. An academic philosopher (professionally trained in Western traditions of philosophy) from an African university, goes into rural areas, and asks villagers to single out someone considered "wise" in their community. Then, if the selected "sage" agrees, an interview commences, with the trained philosopher asking a series of questions, but being flexible enough to let the sage respond comfortably and affect the direction of the conversation.

In the interview, the trained professional philosopher tries *not* to impose any ideas on the person interviewed. It is the *sage's* philosophical views that are mainly to be recorded (as much as possible uncontaminated by the interviewer). Such a careful procedure is important to protect the method from charges that the interviewers are just putting ideas into people's heads. Since

he wants to make a historical point, Oruka is not interested here in proving that *he* can philosophize. However, Oruka does describe the interview as a dialogue where even the academic philosopher's own views on the world may be challenged and modified. Oruka looked particularly for those sages who had *not* had extensive formal schooling and those who practiced traditional African views rather than missionary religions, in order (so far as possible) to collect a sample of explicitly "traditional" African thought, and not Western-influenced derivatives.

### C. Critical Doubts: A Tainted Method?

Oruka seems concerned not to "taint" or "distort" the "sample" in a scientific sense. Of course, if Heisenberg's principle holds in conversation as well as in scientific experiments, Oruka's mere presence (let alone his presence as active questioner) might affect the sage's philosophy (or his expression of it). When studying the interviews, one cannot help but doubt on occasion that the sages would have explained their views so thoroughly without the occasional "devil's advocate" prodding by the interviewers. In fact, this is a purposeful part of Oruka's method. As he specifies, when a sage makes a presumably wise statement, the sage should be challenged to justify it. If the sage has a philosophic frame of mind, he or she will be able to give a defense. If not, the sage may give an unimpressive answer, or may refuse a response altogether. Further provocations from the interviewer may entail offering alternative arguments to the sage's position. Both sage and interviewer may end up with a changed view on the topic (TCAP 54-5; SP 35).

### III. SOCRATIC PARALLELS IN ORUKA'S METHOD

Critics like Peter Bodunrin jump at signs of the interviewer's activity to proclaim that the

results have indeed been shaped by Western philosophy through the background training of the interviewer. Oruka's continued insistence that it is the sages who philosophize, and not himself, should remind us of the role of Socrates. Socrates insists in the *Theaetetus*, for example, that he has not put ideas into the youth's head, but instead is merely helping in the birth of thought in a man pregnant with ideas. Just as midwives are too old to bear children, but have the necessary experience and knowledge to aid young women with the birthing of children, so Socrates suggests that he has no wisdom himself, but is only interested in encouraging the birth of ideas in others, and then testing those ideas to see if they are viable.<sup>5</sup>

Of course one could question the possibility, and appropriateness, of comparing African sage philosophy with ancient Greek philosophy. Are there not pitfalls, and plenty of mistakes to be made, when one attempts to draw significant parallels between the philosophies of different cultures and times? In this case, the precedent for comparison is found in the works of Oruka himself. Significantly, Oruka has argued that the methods of reason are universally applicable, and are not culture-bound. One should not conclude that the use of the philosophic method, based on reason, is legitimate only for the Euro-American world.

In an early article of his entitled "On Philosophy and Humanism in Africa," Oruka describes what he sees as the role and method of universally valid philosophical reasoning in an African context. African philosophers, he suggests, must "create a critical and dialectical philosophy" that has as its goal to "safeguard and promote the value of human life and discourage the prevailing and impending inhuman practices in the [African] Continent."<sup>6</sup> The bulk of Oruka's paper describes the fictional but representative country of ARID (African

Republic of Inhumanity and Death) and the moral cause of its problems. His advocacy of the need for "free thinking" in such a repressive context, by philosophers devoted to the Good of their society, parallels Socrates's stated devotion to the moral integrity of Athens.<sup>7</sup>

I believe Oruka must have had Socrates in mind when he devised his method of questioning the wise sages of Kenya. Oruka described his own method as "sagacious didactics," because it involved going endlessly through twists and turns, challenges and preconceptions, in the course of a question-and-answer session with a Kenyan sage. Oruka states that "the role of the interviewer is to act as the provocateur to the sage. The interviewer is to help the sage *give birth* to his full views on the subject under consideration (SP 36, italics in original)." In this metaphor, the professional philosopher takes on the role of Socrates and questions the wise elders of Kenya in much the same way that Socrates questioned the wise men of Athens. This same notion of the interviewer as active provocateur is echoed by Anthony Oseghare, who is also enthusiastic about the method (SAP 102).

Emphasizing the special nature of philosophy, Oruka states that the philosopher's work entails a particular process. Firstly, it should "apply critical analytical reason to the prevailing social and moral order and place this order in an historical context." It is important when cataloguing to sort out the humanizing principles from the dehumanizing ones. In other words, not all of the tradition is good. Later, the philosopher should subject possible ideals to "the test and analysis of dialectical reason."<sup>8</sup> The ultimate goal is providing a moral foundation for society.

Through his practice of sage philosophy, Oruka intends to shake up parts of the world

beyond the borders of any one African country or community, and become a gadfly of universal significance, as Socrates became. Oruka and followers are trying to sting the Eurocentric philosophical world into waking up to philosophies of traditional African origin. Given these considerations, I believe there are interesting and important parallels between sage philosophy and both the "gadfly" and "midwife" techniques of Socrates. The gadfly aspect has to do with the social role that the philosopher plays regarding the moral integrity of the community. Oruka fills this role regarding two communities. He "shakes up" and "challenges" the rural communities to take seriously the thought of individual and critical dissenters within their own community; but he also challenges members of his own university community in Kenya as well as an international audience of philosophy scholars so that they will own up to the narrowness of the Eurocentric philosophical heritage.

What about Oruka and other interviewers of sages as Socratic midwives? In her article on Socrates' midwifery, Rinita Mazumdar notes three significant aspects of the midwife: "1. She does not put the child into the mother's womb. 2. She merely brings out the child. 3. She tests the offspring to see if it is healthy or not."<sup>9</sup> Oruka claims to follow all of these steps. He claims that he has not put ideas into the sages' heads, but is rather recording their ideas. And he speaks of the importance of rationally testing the ideas for viability and worth.

Socrates, Oruka and other interviewers do not themselves claim to be entirely without wisdom or original ideas of their own. Because of the nature of their project, they choose to withhold their own ideas so as to focus on the ideas of those interviewed. Interestingly enough, in his article "Philosophical Apology in the *Theaetetus*," Scott R. Hemmenway notes that Plato



has Socrates argue for his own lack of wisdom to protect himself from the possible anger Theaetetus might experience once Socrates has defeated one of his newborn ideas. But Hemmenway notes that Theaetetus himself is mild-mannered; the person who is growing truly angry is Theodorus, who is witnessing the dialogue and thinks that it is of dubious merit. Theaetetus, on the other hand, is encouraged by Socrates' apologetic, and becomes inspired to venture another possible idea.<sup>10</sup> Are there any parallels with Oruka's sage philosophy here? The interviewer's reluctance to press his own ideas probably encourages the sage's cooperation in the interview process, and it is more likely that other academic philosophers, akin to Theodorus, are those most likely to be irritated by the whole project.

Oruka himself has a rebuttal for those who would suggest that the new ideas produced by his questioning of the sages must be attributed to himself rather than the sages. He notes that British philosophers like Moore and Russell were responding to challenges in Hegel when they wrote the key points of their philosophies. We consider Moore and Russell philosophers in their own right, and not just the "products" of Hegel. Likewise, the interview may be the "occasion" in which sage philosophers are pressed to clarify their views, and defend their views with rigor; however, they still remain the authors of these ideas (TCAP 43).

Nevertheless, the method of interviewing that Oruka uses deserves careful scrutiny. After all, Hegel and Russell did not strictly "interview" each other. D.A. Masolo notes that Russell formulated his philosophy from the legacy created and established by Hegel, and not from a person-to-person dialogue, thereby rendering Oruka's parallel inexact.<sup>11</sup>

There may be some additional, unintended parallels to the Socratic example as well.

Socrates draws a contrast between the midwife, a woman, whose patients are women trying to give birth to a physical being, and himself, the male "midwife" of male patients who are giving birth to ideas.<sup>12</sup> It is easy to recognize this as a stereotypical and traditional split between the roles of women and men. Here the parallel with Oruka is implicit, perhaps even unconscious. Of the twelve sages interviewed in his book, eleven are men. (There are an additional six men quoted in another chapter.) The one woman interviewed had borne no children in her long life. Does Oruka agree with Socrates that one must turn to men to find those "pregnant with ideas"? This may be the result of Oruka's method, which entails relying on local people to lead the interviewer to a wise person. The cultural connotations of "wise person" in the traditional Kenyan community may associate wisdom with elder males, although other cultures (for example the Yoruba) consider older women, particularly mothers past menopause, to be wise and spiritually powerful.<sup>13</sup> Since the publication in 1991 of *Sage Philosophy*, Oruka has taken notice of the discrepancy between his statements about women's equality and his almost total exclusion of women sages from his book, and attempts are now being made at the University of Nairobi to interview more women.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. TAKING STOCK: HAS ORUKA'S PRACTICE OF SAGE PHILOSOPHY BEEN TRULY SOCRATIC?

Is Oruka's method of interviewing based on the "field research" method of social scientists? Or is it really based on Socratic dialogue? Implicit in Oruka's defense of his method is the assertion that some new philosophizing is indeed coming about through these interviews. If that is so, and yet at the same time the sage is to be considered the author of the new ideas rather than the trained philosopher, then there ought to be something about the interviewing

dynamic that is akin to Socratic midwifery, the aiding in the birth of new ideas through questioning.

#### A. Bodunrin's Critique

Peter Bodunrin, who argues that new ideas arise from the interview, seems nevertheless to want to make a case against Oruka's midwifery in the article that is included in the "critics" section of Oruka's book.<sup>15</sup> Bodunrin suggests that Oruka is merely doing field research that is only marginally related to Socrates' practice of interviewing the wise people of Athens. Bodunrin does accept that interviewer and those being interviewed work together on producing what might emerge as a new insight. But he highlights the following contrasts: Socrates's interlocutors were his intellectual peers; the Athenian *agora* was a speaker's corner, and so more akin to a conference center than a marketplace; Socrates was not satisfied with popular notions of philosophical concepts; and even though Socrates and others did not write down the interviews themselves, they were not illiterate but quite educated (SP 168-69).

Bodunrin takes the parallel in regard to the birthing of new ideas as proving that African philosophy is still "in the making," a new discipline that is only just beginning. The fact that communally recognized "wise persons" can philosophize, when prompted by pesky questioners with doubts and definitional demands, is not the same as saying that an autonomous tradition has existed over time. Here Bodunrin is implicitly referring to Socrates's self-described role as a gadfly in Plato's *Apology*. Who has been the gadfly in the African case? Bodunrin proclaims that it was first the Westerner who came over and claimed that Africans were incapable of philosophizing. Second, it was the African nationalist, who (along with rejecting Western

clothes and ideas) wanted African academic philosophers to stop teaching European philosophy (SP 164). I want to note, however, that the traditional sages were not spurred to action by either of these gadflies. Rather, it was the academically trained philosophers who felt the stings of these gadflies. Perhaps in seeking their own relief, they turn around and "stung" or questioned others, the traditional sages, in response to the skeptical questions of the Europeans and the African nationalists.

On this point I agree with Bodunrin. Oruka's method deviates from Socrates' method insofar as it is aimed at responding to the charges of closed-minded Euro-Americans. This deviation shows itself in Oruka's reluctance to do what he says philosophy must do, to rigorously test each idea of the tradition, to test it for viability, as the philosophical "midwife" does.

Here I think it is interesting to contrast the difference between the occasional anger of the sages with the anger that Socrates sees as directed toward him when people become so angry they are ready to "bite" him. For Socrates, the anger arises when he has just dialectically demolished a newborn idea. He requests of Theaetetus, for instance, that if he should "take the abortion from you and cast it away, do not be savage with me like a woman robbed of her first child."<sup>16</sup> By contrast, if the African sage becomes angry it is not because the interviewer has demolished his (or rarely, her) idea; in fact, the interviewer has been very polite and has not given any criticism. Rather, the sage is sometimes angry at being asked the question in the first place. It is, perhaps, a sense of social propriety that is outraged (TCAP 55).

#### B. Folk vs. Philosophical Sages

Many of those interviewing the sages do not themselves agree with some (or many) of the aspects of the worldviews propounded in the traditions that they have so carefully recorded. Upon my questioning, Oruka admitted that he did not agree with many of his sages' comments on the inequality of the sexes, and that this aspect of tradition should be challenged. In fact, Oruka has divided his sages into two categories. He contrasts mere sages ("folk sages") with those who are both philosophers and sages ("philosophic sages"). "Folk sages" uncritically hold the views of their community; while "philosophic sages" are able to evaluate and criticize the tradition. Oruka clearly holds the second category as more advanced and cites a clear contrast between one sage who agreed with the beliefs of his community that women are inferior to men, and another who opposed this view. He states unequivocally that the second has a sounder view because it is "critical" (TCAP 41).

But the work of recording the ideas of folk sages merely to come to the conclusion that they were wrong in their thinking is of dubious benefit. Oruka himself casts doubt on the philosophical nature of the folk sages' thought through the mere naming of them as "folk sages" in contrast to "philosophic sages." He finds that folk sages hold the common views of their culture, and are often dogmatic in defending their philosophy and the structure of their society "with the zeal of the fanatical ideologists defending their political line." This dogmatism and an inability to criticize the tradition disqualifies them as philosophers. Oruka insists that even Ogotemmel, (interviewed by Marcel Griaule and considered by many to be a wise man) is merely repeating Dogon tradition and shows no signs of having any new, independent thoughts.<sup>17</sup>

Orika has devoted an entire section of his book, about twenty pages, to interviewing seven sages he himself has categorized as folk sages. Could it be that the only reason Oruka includes the folk sages in his book is because of the contrast they provide with the philosophic sages, whom he seemingly wants to champion?

### C. Was Oruka Sufficiently Critical?

Despite Oruka's general comments about the superiority of philosophical sages to folk sages, Oruka does not (either during or after interviews) provide his own analysis or critique of any of the particular claims the sages make. This makes him vulnerable to the criticism of Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argues that most African philosophers stop where he wants them to begin - with evaluating the traditional concepts and beliefs, and asking whether or not they are true.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to contrast Oruka's "neutral" position as interviewer of sages with Socrates' role as "interviewer" of the wise men of Athens. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates asserts that when he began his cross-examination of those reputed to be the wisest men of Athens, he proceeded with an open mind, and did not know beforehand whether or not he would be convinced by their views and arguments. After questioning, however, he decided that they were not wise. Socrates finds his own mission in life: it is his role to show the "wise" for what they are—unknowing—and he considers that he has done a service to Athens each time he "exposes" the faulty views of any of its successful, well-respected members. Of course, Meletus and others complain about Socrates's activity, charging that the youth of Athens will lose respect for their elders if Socrates persists. Considering the diversity of ancient Athens, does one who loves

Greek culture applaud Socrates or resent him for criticizing the society that they love?

I recounted this familiar account of Socrates to draw a contrast between Socrates's goal and at least one of Oruka's. Socrates says his goal is to discover the truth, and he is willing to destroy his society's beliefs and to tear at the social fabric of its traditions, in pursuit of that greater goal. But Oruka's expressed goal is to show forth the richness of African traditions. He does not interview sages to see whether he can "dethrone" them. In fact, we can't imagine Oruka saying, in a Socratic tone, "I have searched throughout rural Kenya, seeking out all men considered wise, and upon cross-examining them, I found all their wisdom to be lacking." This makes Oruka's own criticisms of the sages problematic, however. Because Oruka has said that the philosopher's goal is to provide a moral foundation for society, we expect at least some of the Socratic quest for truth. Here we encounter some conflict in Oruka's goals. In the tradition of philosophy, we expect Oruka to offer his criticisms. Yet because the critical pursuit of truth threatens to glorify his own intellectual prowess at the expense of glorifying wisdom in others, he willingly mutes his own criticisms. Of course, he is trying to give the sages respect due to them but denied by Eurocentric models of progress and rationality. But the issue of how and how much to criticize the traditional thinkers one is championing is a sensitive theme that runs throughout the works of many African philosophers.

In fact, we might consider it ironic that, after Oruka has so greatly stressed the need for a critical component, he himself does not criticize the sages. Within Oruka's edited collection on sage philosophy, Anthony Oseghare comments on two of the twelve sages included in the text, the philosophical sages John Mbuya and Oruka Rang'inya. The other ten sages are presented in

the book without comment. Anthony Oseghare emphasizes the aspects of their thought which he finds valuable, and offers no criticisms (SP 156-160). In fact, all of the articles gathered in part three of Oruka's book (entitled "Criticisms") are critical of Oruka's project of sage philosophy, and not of philosophical positions held by the sages. It seems to me that while professional philosophers in Africa feel free to criticize each other's theories endlessly, most are reluctant to criticize the notions of the wise elders of their communities.

Could it be the case that unchallenged sages have been flawless in their arguments? Let me present one criticism in order to shed doubt on this hypothesis. At the beginning of the interview, philosophic sage Oruka Rang'inya states that "God resides both in this world as well as in `heaven.'" He explains, "God lives in the wind. Thus, he is everywhere." But he also insists that God is an "idea" and a "useful concept." (SP 119) There is some ambiguity here about God's nature. Does God exist? Is God spatially located, in the wind, and everywhere? Or is God a "mere" idea? The issue is further complicated when the sage later states that the very idea of heaven is fictitious and an illusion (SP 128). This problematizes his earlier statement about God living both in this world and in heaven. How can God live in a fiction? Without further explanation, it looks as if Rang'inya is making contradictory claims.

Another difficulty with sage philosophers is that while some of their insights may well be unique or clever, they may not seem like satisfactory answers either to traditional African or to Western questions. For example, Rang'inya suggests that the reason people are mortal is to ease congestion in the world, and to make room for others (SP 127). This statement alone, I suspect, would not be comforting to people pondering their own mortality and the possible meaning of



their brief lives. Nor does it answer the questions so pressing in African traditional philosophy, such as why a particular person died at a particular time, in a particular way.<sup>19</sup> It also does not explain why deaths occur in sparsely populated areas. Perhaps his remark is meant to encourage a certain attitude toward death, to encourage people to find solace in the well being of the community and not to cling, in futile fashion, to their own individual lives. Rang'inya's account is perhaps refreshing in its uniqueness and lightheartedness, but is it philosophically satisfactory, or even enlightening?

#### D. Was Oruka A Good Midwife?

At this point I want to raise again the question of method. Is Oruka's questioning a real case of Socratic midwifery? Midwifery does not seem to be Oruka's singular method, and there is ambiguity in his descriptions. At one point, while describing his method, Oruka laments that Plato had no tape recorder to interview Socrates. His immediate point is that because of this, we can't be sure just what Socrates said or what Plato put into Socrates' mouth, a problem which is avoided in the careful method of sage philosophy. In contrast, in the compiled summaries of ethnophilosophy or other philosophers, the reader is left out of the process and only shown the pre-sorted "results" (SP 41). Apart from Oruka's lament, lovers of Plato might be greatly disappointed if instead of Plato's written *Dialogues* we had audiotapes of interviews undertaken by Socrates. In the field of philosophy we expect interviewers to do more than just make a careful record. We appreciate their evaluation of and commentary upon the thoughts of others whom they encounter.

At different points in his essays, Oruka seems to reinforce one of the following explanations of

the function of the interviewer, and deny the other functions: 1. the interviewer as careful recorder of what the sage says (social science research mode); 2. the interviewer as recorder as well as commentator and analyzer of the sage's views (Plato/ professional philosopher); 3. The interviewer as midwife and provocateur of the sage's philosophical statements (Socrates).

Which of these three modes characterizes Oruka's method most aptly? From the texts of the interviews, I would argue that he most often engages in the first category of social science research. He on occasion takes on the role of provocateur and even more rarely he engages in commentary on the sages' ideas beyond general praise—perhaps with good reason, considering the aforementioned difficulty in gaining the sages' cooperation. For example, when a sage expresses views contrary to Oruka's own views on the equality of the sexes, Oruka does not take up the battle, as we would expect Socrates to do, until he has succeeded in changing the sage's view. Rather, Oruka lets the sage speak his mind and then moves on to another topic (SP 113, 121, 132). Is this not the method of the careful social scientist?

But on occasion, an intriguing account will encourage Oruka to ask a follow-up question that attempts to push the response past further description and into the realm of new ideas. Sometimes the sages themselves change or further specify their answers in the midst of their own account, spurred on just by the difficulty of clarifying their views. For example, when Paul Mbuya Akoko is asked about freedom, he answers at first that freedom means free from restraint, the ability to do as one pleases. When the interviewer asks whether all, or only a few, experience freedom, he answers at first that some people have more freedom than others. But he admits, in the course of his description, that even the President's ability to act without constraint

is quite limited, and so he concludes that there is no complete freedom. After prodding, he further ventures that one could, through wealth, ensure one's freedom, but he quickly notices that even the wealthy depend upon others and so are not free (SP 143-44). In other words, the sage was forced to clarify his own conception of freedom by scrutinizing whether or not the concept could be applied consistently in specific instances.

Sometimes the repeated provocation of Oruka will lead to a blind alley. For example, consider Oruka's interview with the Luhya sage, Okemba Simiyu Chaungo. Much of the interview is generated by a list of standard philosophical questions such as: What is life? What are good and evil? What is truth? What is happiness? Such short and abstract questions draw an almost definitional response with some personalized insights. But on one question, Oruka pursued Simiyu beyond the description given. When Simiyu was describing his understanding that God gives some people (and not others) the gift of divining, Oruka pressed him to explain why God gives the gift only to some people. On this question, however, Simiyu was stuck (SP 111-12). One recalls Cephalus, the successful old man in Plato's *Republic*, and how Socrates considers his account of justice to be inadequate. Cephalus himself admits that he can pursue the question of justice no further. But it is also interesting how Cephalus does not seem to have his ego invested in his ability to answer Socrates's questions adequately. In Plato's account, Cephalus says to his son Polemarchus and to his friends: "Oh well... I hand over the word to you people; it is high time now for me to see after the sacred rites."<sup>20</sup>

I cannot help getting the same impression from some of Oruka's interviews. The sages are self-confident in their perception of themselves as important and busy people who have

graciously spared some time for Oruka and his questions; but they will not be haunted by their inability to provide answers to all of a series of abstract questions. In fact, this raises the issue whether it is even appropriate to subject sages to such questioning. What guarantee do we have that such questioning will bring out the best of the wisdom of those being interviewed? Would not observing them go about the daily practices that have earned them respect for possessing wisdom perhaps give us a more accurate account? If they are medicine men, how do they consult the sick? How do they practice their craft? If they are diviners, how do they ascertain the future? What consultation methods do they use? This knowledge would constitute a lived philosophy.

But Socrates would hardly have been satisfied with lived and practiced crafts of "wisdom" that could not be articulated. After all, he was not satisfied with the Athenian poets who could not, during questioning, explain in words how poetry differs from other forms of language. Like diviners, they "say many fine things but do not understand what they say"; rather, they depend on "natural genius and inspiration."<sup>21</sup> In fact, there is a parallel between Appiah's and Socrates' frustration, as Appiah is not satisfied with the Ghanian priest who knows all of the proper rituals, without knowing *why* any particular thing must be done in that fashion.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike many others, Oruka's colleague D.A. Masolo takes it upon himself to criticize individual sages as well as to cast doubt on the philosophical nature of Oruka's method in *African Philosophy in Search of an Identity*. Masolo criticizes Paul Mbuya's statements on the equality of men and women, not because they lack truth or rationality, but rather because they are mere statements of common sense "without much of the usual elaboration that often goes with

philosophic exposition."<sup>23</sup> Masolo wonders whether Oruka is willing to call philosophical any statement of opinion which is clever or non-mediocre. Because of the weakness of Oruka's examples, Masolo charges that the sages are not philosophers. He adds that "Afrocentric interests are not a sufficient reason for asking readers to accept African wise men and women as philosophers,"<sup>24</sup> and he suggests that Oruka has been too pleased with too little evidence just because it fits into his overall political project of challenging Eurocentric notions of philosophy.

#### V. THE SAGE PHILOSOPHY PROJECT: WHAT REMAINS?

##### A. Is Socratic Practice a Valid Standard?

After all of this criticism of the content of the sages' views, what can be said in defense of the practice of sage philosophy and in defense of the embattled sages themselves?

I think that some of the harsh criticism dished out to the sages interviewed is due to the model of Socratic dialogue itself. Was Socrates fair in the way he criticized his verbal opponents? In his book *The Trial of Socrates*, I.F. Stone suggests that the "negative dialectic" that became Socrates's favorite method tended to ridicule respected people in Athenian society because they could not come up with accurate definitions for their ideas. Given the lack of such definitions, which even he himself could not provide, Socrates concluded that most great men in Athens knew "little or nothing."<sup>25</sup> Stone accuses Socrates of gross oversimplifications. Certainly, community leaders should be those "who know"—but who know what? They should know enough to lead their communities wisely. Stone says that for Socrates, "the man `who knows' had to be a professional philosopher. His `knowledge' had to be a specialized metaphysical figment."<sup>26</sup> But no one, including philosophers, could be said to possess real

epistemological knowledge in this narrow sense of the term. Stone suggests that the practical, working knowledge of the wise men of Athens was overlooked or devalued by Socrates's method.

Certainly, as was noted earlier, Oruka's goal is not to debunk the sages. Their beliefs might be easily debunked by philosophers trained in the tradition of Socrates's "negative dialectic." But I suggest that this would entail selling the tradition short. In these interviews the sages appear out of their context, and hence their lived wisdom does not shine forth best in such settings. If the job really is to record and preserve the best of a wisdom tradition, it must be done by methods not so foreign to the sages' lives.

#### B. The *Sages* as Midwives

It could be that in their original context, the sages serve as midwives of others. A person with a reputation for wisdom is often called upon for advice. When people come to tell the sage their troubles, that sage might try to elicit information, and perhaps a solution, from the person. Additionally, the use of proverbs often seems intended to encourage a person to search out a meaning for themselves; a sage would not say "the meaning of the proverb is this, and so you should do this...." In this way the use of proverbs was Socratic insofar as it challenged these people to see for themselves, instead of having answers handed to them on a silver platter. By Oruka asking all of the questions, we do not have a chance to see what kind of questions the sage would like to ask people, and so we do not see the sage in his or her Socratic role. It could also be that the subject matter of interest would change if the sages themselves were in charge of the topics. As it is, the topics reflect the standard interests of Western philosophy.

Although I have focused in this paper on Oruka's modeling of the interviewer on Socrates in his role as midwife, in many places Oruka states that the *sage* is like Socrates. Although Oruka is not commenting in such passages on the sage's use of Socratic midwifery, he does draw parallels between some of Socrates's other characteristics and those of the sages. For example, he suggests that the sages are "as reflective as Socrates was" (TCAP 30).

This interest in Socrates as a model or point of comparison for the African sage shows itself during Oruka's conversation with his colleague, Chaungo Barasa, whom Oruka also regarded as a sage. Barasa, who has had some exposure to the practice of Western philosophy, claims that in every society there are some few special people (although Barasa is quick to explain that they are not "superior") who feel especially inclined to mental exercises, and who feel "the craving to enlighten society about the rationale behind various values of their society (SP 149)." As an example of this kind of person Barasa gives both Socrates and the Bukusu spiritual leader Masinde. An additional parallel between Masinde and Socrates, in Barasa's opinion, is the fact that each claimed to be a messenger of the gods, sent to be a "gadfly" in order to lead their communities to a life of wisdom.

We could ask some skeptical questions about Barasa's parallel. It is true that Socrates said he was sent by the gods, but not with a special message to relay, as other prophetic messengers from God have done. He was sent by the god in order to free others from their false claims to knowledge, even if it means leaving them, at least temporarily, empty-handed. Is this the kind of messenger Masinde was? If it were only a case of meeting Oruka's definition of caring about the ethics of their society, then surely Socrates and Masinde have that in common—

but how much else is in common?

VI. CONCLUSION: SAGACITY AND PHILOSOPHICAL REASON

We can find in Oruka's works a careful description of what it means to be a sage, and the importance of sagacity. I have already covered the way in which Oruka points out the need for a sage to be philosophical in the critical and reflective sense. But Oruka also insists that philosophers must be sagacious. In his introduction to *Sage Philosophy*, he insists that the philosopher's tools of analysis and criticism are empty without the sage's gift for intuition. While both the philosopher and sage need insights, the sage usually "earns high marks" in insight compared to the "common run" of analytic philosophers. In addition, the sage has both insight and ethical inspiration (SP 9). Some sages are philosophers, but in his estimation many philosophers are not sages, for they may love arguments without caring for the well-being of the society. Following from this distinction, he suggests that Socrates is best understood as a sage, because he "used philosophy only as a means to advance his sagacity and expose the hypocrisies of his time" (SP 10). In order to strengthen his argument, he quotes Richard Bell, who concurs that Socrates should be regarded as a sage, or a "sagacious philosopher" (SP 6). In this description, sages are seen as better than the mere philosophers insofar as the sages are concerned with the ethical well-being of society.

It is important to point out that Oruka in general wants all philosophers, including those with an academic Western training, to care about improving the ethics of their societies. Professional philosophers can ideally be like Socrates in their quest for a more just Africa. At this point we can conclude that while sages are distinguished from mere philosophers by their



commitment to society's betterment in a moral sense, Oruka has at the same time suggested that philosophy without this sagacious commitment to living well is empty technique.

In conclusion, Oruka's description of sages and philosophers is normative in that he charts a course for philosophers to take in Africa in this century. I think Oruka's contrasts of philosophers and sages could be described in the following categories: (1) mere sages are concerned with ethical norms but uncritical of traditions and unreflective; (2) mere philosophers are technical and critical analysts divorced from concerns of the well-being of society; (3) philosophic sages are insightful, traditional wise persons who are reflectively critical and committed to society's well being; and (4) sagacious philosophers are professional philosophers whose practice of their discipline is not divorced from the needs and concerns of members of their society and humanity at large.

The first two categories are more limited in their worth than the last two, those that combine sagacity and philosophy. Oruka has therefore charted a normative course for the practice of philosophy in Africa and elsewhere. Oruka's efforts have tried to bridge the gap between the academic and the illiterate and between tradition and modernity in order to find a common rallying point for the efforts of a popular philosophy, a "wisdom" to be sought by young and old alike, in dialogue with all members of the community. He has found a *project* for philosophy that would make it an integral part of the community and culture rather than an academic exercise imported from European textbooks. Just as it could be argued in the West that an adequate rendering of Socrates entails applying the concepts to contemporary dilemmas, so also Oruka has done the same for Africa: he has enthused many academics and has

encouraged them to seek out and dialogue with others in their communities, in pursuit of the applied knowledge that we call wisdom. Philosophy is done in the streets and not only in conference centers. And so it is perhaps appropriate that, despite the serious shortcomings of his midwifery and his method, Oruka goes off the beaten path to rural villages to find his sages involved in philosophical speculation and analysis of the events of their communities.<sup>27</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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1.H. Odera Oruka, *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990), hereafter TCAP, p. 7.

2. See TCAP 46; Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 11. Note that in *Classical Ethiopian Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Adey Publishing Co., 1994) Claude Sumner has collected quite a few sub-Saharan philosophical texts from Ethiopia. I have analyzed these written works in my article, "Should Women Love 'Wisdom'? Evaluating the Ethiopian Wisdom Tradition," *Research in African Literatures*, 30/2, 1999, pp. 165-81.

3. Anthony Oseghare, "Sagacity and African Philosophy," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 32/1 (March 1992), hereafter SAP. Oruka's work is prominently mentioned in Segun Gbadegesin, "Current Trends and Perspectives in African Philosophy" in *A Companion to World Philosophies*, ed. Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) pp. 548-63. Oruka's interview with sage Paul Mboya Akoko is included in *I am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, ed. Fred Lee Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee (Amherst: Univ. of Mass. Press, 1995) pp. 32-44. A recent collection with several articles on sage philosophy is *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam*, ed. Kai Kresse and Anke Graness (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997).

4.H. Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991), hereafter SP.

5. Plato, "Theaetetus," *Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 149b, 150c.

6.H. Odera Oruka, "On Philosophy and Humanism in Africa," *Philosophy and Social Action*, V/1-2 (1979), pp. 7-33 at 7.

7. See two of my papers which address these issues at length: "H. Odera Oruka on Moral Reasoning," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 34/4 (2000); "On a Moral Mission to Improve Society: H. Odera Oruka and the Socratic Paradigm," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 14/2 (Fall 2000), pp. 225-40.

8.Oruka, "Philosophy and Humanism," p. 8.

9.Rinita Mazumdar, "How Significant is Socrates' Midwifery?" *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 19/4 (1992), 311-26 at 313.

10.Scott R. Hemmenway, "Philosophical Apology in the *Theaetetus*," *Interpretation* 17/3 (Spring 1990), 326.

11.D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of an Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 238.

12.Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150b-c.

13.Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 71-75. Note, however, that these powerful women are past childbearing age, another illustration of the notion that one either gives birth to babies or ideas, not to both.

14.I discuss this issue further in my article, "Who Counts as a Sage? Problems in the Further Implementation of Sage Philosophy," *Quest: Philosophical Discussions*, 11/1-2 (1997), 53-65.

15.Peter Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy," in SP, p. 166.

16.Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151c.

17.H. Odera Oruka, "Sagacity in African Philosophy," in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, ed. Tsenay Serequeberhan, (New York: Paragon House, 1991), pp. 52-53.

18.Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), p. 96.

19.Gyekye gives a detailed account of the concept of destiny that have arisen in the Akan tradition, partly, to make sense of death. See Gyekye, *Akan Conceptual Scheme*, pp. 104-23.

20. Plato, *Republic* 331d in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, tr. W.H.D. Rouse (Mentor/New American Library, 1956).

21. Plato, *Apology* 22c in *Great Dialogues of Plato*.

22. Appiah, *In My Father's House*, pp. 108-09.

23. Masolo, *In Search of Identity*, p. 236.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

25. I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1988), p. 82.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

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