

GAIL'S ARTICLE

philosophy. In many cases these sessions were co-sponsored with other committees, societies and associations within the APA, including the Committee on the Status of Hispanics, the Committee on the Status of Women Philosophers, the Association of Chinese Philosophers in America, the Society for the Study of African Philosophy in North America, the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy and the Radical Philosophy Association. At our Rutgers meeting last summer we discussed the fact that the committee is no longer the sole sponsor of sessions on topics related to the study of Africana philosophy. With the official APA recognition of Society for the Study of African Philosophy and the founding of the Alain Locke Society the number of sessions offered in this area will increase. Since the committee's charge includes the interests of all black philosophers (including African and West Indian philosophers), there is a need for some mechanism to promote the interests of black philosophers who work in traditional areas.

RECRUITMENT AND OUTREACH

The endeavor to recruit more black philosophers is an ongoing task that requires activity at several different levels. Funding agencies such as Mellon and the Ford Foundation have realized the importance of strategic intervention and now provide financial support for minority candidates with potential at the level of undergraduate, graduate and post-doctorate. These agencies have also shown a greater appreciation of the importance of minority involvement in professional organizations. Their annual conferences aim to foster networking among minority scholars. By supporting some of the initiatives listed below, perhaps the APA can approximate a successful version of this model.

The committee can play an instrumental role in the recruitment and retention of black students in philosophy by tapping into the institutional resources each committee member brings to the committee, specifically the material required for communication. A network of supportive faculty in graduate programs can work in tandem with funding agencies by providing undergraduate and graduate fellowship recipients guidance necessary for success. In return, programs that produce successful black graduate students will enhance their funding potential. Once this network has been established, black philosophers, as well as philosophers who have experience working with black students can be a valuable resource for projects aimed toward the recruitment of black students in philosophy undergraduate and graduate programs. Undergraduate initiatives such as the Summer Institute at Rutgers, the Jericho Project at the University of Tennessee, or the Minority Fellowship Program at The University of Iowa, as well as Howard University's M.A. program, must rely on a network of faculty who work with black students to achieve their objectives. The committee constitutes a vital part of this network, but to be effective, a

aining constant communication and contact sopher in various parts of the country must As chair I often received dozens of requests es of black philosophers. The most reliable tion regarding black philosophers is the d by Lucius Outlaw. The APA ought to fund this directory and make it available at cost. Rutgers meeting the committee also discussed the need for a black graduate student representative on the committee. This student would serve as a liaison who would be primarily responsible for organizing and communicating with black students in philosophy. By giving black students in philosophy a voice in the affairs of the committee, we can enhance our effort to develop a sound policy towards recruitment and retention.

One important endeavor of the committee has been outreach to the community. The committee has recognized a special need to make philosophy visible in minority communities. A proven means of increasing minority interest in philosophy is to demonstrate the practical application of critical reasoning in a less alienating cultural context. Although there is no substitute for the concrete experience of engaging in a philosophical discussion of important community issues—an experience that can be a turning point for many potential black philosophy students, the broadcast of the panel discussion on race, religion and democracy at the Riverside Church by C-SPAN on Martin Luther King, Jr's birthday enabled a philosophy session at an APA meeting to reach a national television audience that included many black viewers. (Frank Kirkland, who did an excellent job organizing this event, will provide a follow-up report on the success of this project.) With the Riverside event as a model, similar panels involving community representatives and philosophers could be set up in several cities with large black populations. To maximize outcomes these structured conversations should be held at community sites using local media. The APA should fund the proposals that have the greatest outreach potential.

ARTICLES

WAYS IN WHICH ORAL PHILOSOPHY IS SUPERIOR TO WRITTEN PHILOSOPHY: A LOOK AT ODERA ORUKA'S RURAL SAGES

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Odera Oruka, who died only recently, devoted his life to tape-recording and then writing down the oral wisdom of rural

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African sages in his home country of Kenya.¹ Although some of the sages had written books, usually in their native languages, Odera Oruka specifically looked for sages who had not been "indoctrinated" by the Western education present in Kenya and so as a result many of the sages were illiterate. Odera Oruka was motivated to do so, because he was concerned that Europeans and Americans continued to think of the African continent as devoid of a tradition of African philosophizing, since there were no written texts to prove otherwise.² In this context, he points to Socrates as an undisputed example of a philosopher who did not write down his philosophy.³ Lucius Outlaw notices professional philosophers practice "selective amnesia" when they conveniently forget Socrates did not write, while they attack the sages in Oruka's study for their illiteracy.⁴ Oruka therefore draws the conclusion that there is no proof that traditional Africa was free of philosophical thoughts, merely because texts written over the centuries do not exist. However we must note that pointing out that some past Africans probably philosophized without writing still leaves them lost to history insofar as we don't know what their names are or what philosophical positions they held.

Odera Oruka had nowhere in his written work argued that an oral tradition produces better philosophers in any sense. Because of his limited interest in the comparison, he did not go into any detail about how the orality of Socrates is like the orality of the African sages. Therefore, he left himself open to a string of criticism that argued that although philosophizing is perhaps not impossible without writing, it becomes much better once it is written. This debate circled around not only Odera Oruka's sage philosophy project, but around other philosophers interested in mining the philosophy of traditional Africa.

Peter Bodunrin, Oruka's critic, concedes that philosophy can exist in an oral form, but he asserts that for philosophy to progress, it must be written down.⁵ Masolo adds that "The value of reading and writing in the domain of scholarship cannot be exaggerated."⁶ He quotes Jack Goody as explaining the benefits of literacy compared to orality: "Writing, and more especially alphabetic literacy, made it possible to scrutinize discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semi-permanent form; this scrutiny favored the increase in scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, skepticism, and logic..."⁷

The crux of the debate in the Akan context is captured in Safro Kwame's recent collection.⁸ Here, several thinkers correspond back and forth with each other, illustrating by their own actions Kwame Anthony Appiah's point that careful analysis of arguments is only possible with a written text. Formal philosophy, Appiah states, requires justification by evidence and reasons, as well as consistency; these criteria are easier to fulfill with reference to a written record.⁹ For example, Wiredu quotes Gyekye's work in the context of their attempt at clarifying the meaning of "African philosophy," then Gyekye disputes Wiredu's interpretations of the passages he has singled out for scrutiny.¹⁰ Without the passages

themselves, we'd be reduced to reminiscing about what we thought so-and-so-said at the last conference or public lecture; an obvious hindrance.

Safro Kwame quotes Hountondji's complaint, that thousands of Socrates could never have given birth to Greek philosophy; because without writing, a tradition cannot grow and build upon itself.¹¹ This would seem to suggest that even if Odera Oruka found a thousand undocumented contemporary philosophic sages in Kenya, they would not add up to a tradition. Kwasi Wiredu clarifies his position as thus: writing is necessary for developing philosophy as an academic discipline, yet one can still do serious philosophy without writing.¹² Wiredu's comments are more promising, therefore; Odera Oruka could argue that his sages are proof that there is a tradition of doing serious philosophy in Africa, even if that tradition is not specifically academic.

Interestingly enough, the editor, Safro Kwame, puts Wiredu and Oruka in the same category, along with Bodunrin, Hountondji and Appiah, into what he calls the "individualist-literary camp" which requires individual, personal writing for there to be philosophy.¹³ This group is contrasted to the "so-called ethnophilosophical camp which includes Gyekye, Oguah, Kagame, Mbiti and Senghor. This latter group acknowledges unquestioningly the existence of traditional African philosophy¹⁴ and Kwame is accurate insofar as it is true that Odera Oruka was an unfailing critic of what he called ethnophilosophy. But I want to clarify that it cannot be because philosophy could not exist without writing; from the quotations of Odera Oruka cited above, he obviously does not consider literacy a requirement. However, he does indeed consider individualism a requirement. He rejected ethnophilosophy as an implicit communal philosophy, or thought without a thinker. He therefore only sides with the "individualist" part of the "individualist-literary camp" cited by Safro Kwame.

Kwame Gyekye tries to guard himself against what he considers unjust criticism of his procedure, by noting clearly that his own position is that African traditional thought is indeed produced by individual thinkers, whose names have unfortunately been lost to us because of lack of emphasis on individual authorship in the African oral tradition.¹⁵ Oruka's own study tries to avoid such problems by focusing on who could ironically be called the "contemporary tradition." Here we are referring to what E. Wamala calls the "spatial" rather than the "temporal" aspect of traditional Africa, in which rural Africa is seen as traditional and urban Africa is seen as modern.¹⁶ By going to rural areas and finding contemporary thinkers who are philosophizing while being part of the African tradition, Oruka can show that there was, and indeed is, the practice of African philosophy in the African tradition. Since they are contemporaries, they do not need to remain anonymous or hypothetical; in fact Oruka prefers if they are named and credited with their own words.

But Odera Oruka's concern with individualism doesn't stop with the sages being named; he insists that their thinking be individualistic also. Or rather, he admits that some of

them only reflect, however articulately, the beliefs of their group; these he categorizes as folk sages, who are not utterly worthless socially, but neither are they philosophers in his sense. A second category, philosophic sages, show critical independence of thought. This shows that Oruka's definition of philosopher is still narrower than Gyekye's. Oruka would insist that Appiah's charge that African folk philosophy relies on tradition and authority as reasons for their convictions, would not apply to his philosophic sages, who show through their interviews that they indeed have reasoned arguments for their positions.¹⁷

Socrates' Orality

I would like to suggest that the closer scrutiny of orality would indeed reveal the ways in which written philosophy is impoverished by comparison. Then we would realize that a transition from oral to written philosophy is a mixed blessing, that brings with it certain drawbacks as well as progress in intellectual rigor. I would like to make this point by first analyzing the role of orality in Socrates' philosophy, since Socrates is used by Odera Oruka as the basis of his claim that philosophy can be done without writing.

Indeed, Friedlander argues that even Plato, who devoted his life to writing philosophic dialogues, agreed with his teacher Socrates that oral speech and living encounter and dialogue with others was the superior method of philosophizing. After all it is Plato who has Socrates argue for the superiority of spontaneous orality in the dialogues themselves. In the *Phaedrus*, Alkimadas says that only the word arising spontaneously out of thought is possessed of soul and life.¹⁸ Socrates calls the spoken word "living and possessed of soul." In fact, the ancient Greek tradition was not centered on writing. Even the Homeric epic is written to be sung. Apollo discovered verse and music. In contrast, it was the Phoenicians who brought writing. As recounted by Plato's Socrates, Thoth, the Egyptian discoverer of the written character, thought letters were a medicinal herb for memory and wisdom. But Friedlander wonders, aren't they rather conducive to forgetfulness, since memory gets no exercise?¹⁹

An important aspect of orality and conversation as the site of philosophy is the role of personal presence. Socrates does not only convey meaning through his words, but also through his nearness. Once again this is an aspect of Socrates that is often overlooked but still quite important. Take for example what Aristedes says to Socrates in *Theages*:

I made progress when I was with you, if only in the same house, not in the same room; and still more, so it seemed to me, when I was in the same room and looked at you (rather than elsewhere) as you were talking; but most all when I sat beside you, quite close, and touched you.²⁰

Friedlander admits that the description sounds "occult" but insists that would be a misinterpretation. Rather the description is witness to the powerful presence of Socrates that in some way conveyed more meaning than his mere words. Friedlander suggests that this passage is autobiographical on Plato's part, and that only such a depiction could explain Plato's continued loyalty to his teacher throughout his life.²¹

If Friedlander is right, Socrates as philosopher is not merely the sum of his arguments. His greatness also lies in his ability to inspire others, to an extent so great that their lives are changed. Merely being in his presence convinced many that he was no ordinary person. We must note that Friedlander is using the concept of "orality" to cover not only spoken words as contrasted to written words, but also or mainly, concrete presence of the speaker in contrast to absence of the author. Merely offering the public taped versions of books, which could be listened to while one commutes down the highway, would not be an improvement of understanding over the written word. There is still a great deal of distance between the communicator and the listener in the case of an audio or even video tape.

Grace Ogot explains that writing down Africa's oral tradition will distort it in some sense. She asks, "What happens to the warmth and richness of the speaking human voice? What happens to the sense of participation of the listener? How is the sustained attention of a reader to be maintained?"²² Likewise, the writing down of a sage's advice is bound to have less impact. Richard H. Bell notes that "it is no secret that any written form, including the written dialogue, fails to capture a spirited, critical discussion among human beings."²³

It is in this sense of orality as including personal presence that there are interesting parallels to the African sages. They are often of such strong presence, that it seems inadequate merely to repeat their words in a written interview. The words on paper appear out of context, without the presence of the person shining through. This may explain the dissatisfaction of some critics with the brilliance of the sayings. Masolo argues that many of the statements of supposed wisdom seem like common sense, or perhaps exceptionally clever, but not necessarily philosophical.²⁴ However, we've all had the experience of reading some great advice, but not being able to internalize it. Perhaps we lacked the motivation, or the commitment. Part of the sages' success is in getting people to act upon the wise solution to the problem. Many sages insisted that they see a problem through to its solution. They would not be satisfied with their advice failing an deaf ears. Compliance on the part of others cannot be reduced to fear or coercion, for the sages have no means of violence. Rather we can suggest that it is due to respect, and sometimes to awe.²⁵

Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba explains that *Nzonzi*, or community leaders in traditional African villages which he describes as "masters of the clarification of speech" and "dialecticians"—have a special role to play. They "must know

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how to listen attentively, and tirelessly; to pick up the essence of each word spoken; to observe every look, every gesture, every silence; to grasp their respective significance. and to elaborate .. arguments to counter .. unjust positions and/or to reaffirm or reinforce correct positions."²⁶ Such actions require presence at the scene of dialogue and debate. Bell considers the Nzonzi's actions as one way in which a narrative aspect of philosophy which is both art and science is "woven into the fabric of life."²⁷

Nevertheless, the repeating of an African sage's argument does not always impress; just as in Plato's Dialogues, one can find contradictions and faults in the arguments. Findlay argues that the Socratic arguments in Plato's early dialogues are "as brimful of fallacy as are the ordinary or sophistical positions to which they oppose themselves, often more so."²⁸ Yet Socrates is considered one of the founders of philosophy. This is not to pardon either Socrates or the African sages for their fallacies, but to note that our estimation of the greatness must look at the wider factors of their lives. Indeed, many of the things that Appiah points out such as lack of consistency or weakness of argument, are apparent while scrutinizing the text of a sage's interview. Therefore an important further stage in sage philosophy is not just to memorialize the sages as they are, but to use the texts to further criticize or build upon their views, in much the same way that commenting on the Platonic dialogues clarifies ideas and helps us to understand contemporary problems in the light of Socrates' and Plato's wisdom. Odera Oruka, according to an interview between himself and Kai Kresse of Germany six months before his death, hoped himself to engage in more in-depth study of each individual sage as the next step in his project.²⁹ Such aspirations will no longer be possible for Odera Oruka, but studies have already been begun by certain graduate students at University of Nairobi. For example, Wairimu Gichohi's thesis which centers on Oruka's sage philosophy contains excellent analyses and criticisms of several of the sages.³⁰

Conclusion

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that it was vitally important that Plato write down what Socrates had said orally since it was this written version which made Socrates important to us.³¹ But here is my point: that while it may be true that, without writing, much of the memory of Socrates would have faded. He would not have been less important to his contemporaries who encountered him concretely, in the flesh, in the context of an oral culture. Likewise Odera Oruka wants to preserve the memory and the wisdom of the sages—by introducing them to us, readers. Now we can read what the sages only said. But their own communities would remember them even without a written record.

Although written texts cannot be produced, it is safe to hypothesize, based on the now documented existence of rural African sages, that there has been a tradition of philosophic sagacity. This practice of philosophic sagacity is

indeed different from the academic version delineated by Masolo and others; and yet, per Wiredu's definition, it is still serious. It is true that sages sometimes hold contradictory ideas that may be more easily caught on paper, but then again literate philosophers have also held contradictions until they have been pointed out. The tradition of sagacious philosophizing succeeds, however, in areas where academic philosophers may fail, regarding their being taken seriously by the members of their community and having their ideas implemented.

Sages I interviewed in rural Kenya who had been part of Odera Oruka's larger sage philosophy project, narrated many specific cases in which they were called in to solve disputes that nobody else could rectify. Their success at finding an ethical and just solution that would be actually implemented was based partly on their ability to understand the situation deeply by listening to all parties, whom they had often known for many years, and reflecting on the moral dilemmas at hand in the context of the larger problems of the society. But when the solution was found, why should stubborn parties agree to abide by the decision? I suggest that it's due to the influence of the personal presence of the sage.³²

It's true, as Appiah states, that proverbs are context-dependent, and that those who use them presume a background knowledge shared by the people with whom they speak.³³ Written words can speak to a larger audience; but oral words spoken in a limited context can speak deeply to a few people. This notion of the embodied speaker and the living witness is one that comes through in the context of orality. And, in the context of Odera Oruka's recent death, it is this aspect of himself as a philosopher, his person as presence, and living inspiration for the sage philosophy project, that is now missing from our lives. But Odera Oruka showed us by his works that both oral and written philosophy are important: he emphasized orality's importance by insisting that the rural sages be taken seriously; he emphasized the importance of writing by documenting their thoughts for the benefit of the larger world philosophical community. While missing his presence, we still have his written works, which will inspire criticism and analysis in the future.

Endnotes

1. H. Odera Oruka died in a road accident on December 9th, 1995, in Nairobi, Kenya, and was buried at his rural home in East Ugenya on December 23, 1995.
2. H. Odera Oruka, *Oqinqa Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs*. Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1992.
3. H. Odera Oruka, *Sane Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991, p. 2. See also Brill Publishers, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1990.
4. Lucius Outlaw, in Odera Oruka, *Sane Philosophy*, p. 220.

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* The nonviolent tradition
every reading a misreading

5. Peter Bodunrin, in Odera Oruka, *Sane Philosophy*, p. 176-6.
6. D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of an Identity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 241.
7. Jack Goody, in Mastic, *African Philosophy in Search*, p. 242.
8. Safro Kwame, ed, *Readings in African Philosophy: An Akan Collection*. New York: University Press of America, 1995.
9. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Philosophy and Necessary Questions," included in S. Kwame, *Readings*, pp. 12, 16.
10. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, in "African Philosophy and the Akan Society: A Correspondence," in S. Kwame, *Readings*, pp. xxxviii-xl.
11. S. Kwame, *Readings*, xx.
12. Kwasi Wiredu, in S. Kwame, *Readings*, xxxiii.
13. S. Kwame, *Readings*, p. 31.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
15. Gyekye, in S. Kwame, *Readings*, xxxv.
16. E. Wamala, "The Socio-Political Philosophy of Traditional Buganda Society: Breaks and Continuity into the Present," in A. Dalfovo, et al., *The Foundations of Social Life: Ugandan Philosophical Studies*, I. Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research and Values in Philosophy, 1992, p. 37.
17. Appiah, in S. Kwame, *Readings*, p. 5-6.
18. Paul Friedlander, *Plato 1: An Introduction*. trans. by Hans Meyerhoff. Second edition with revisions. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 111.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 112.
20. Plato, in Friedlander, *Plato I*, p. 130.
21. Friedlander, *Plato I*, p. 130.
22. Grace Ogot, "The African Writer," in *East African Journal*, 5 (1968), p. 35.
23. Richard H. Bell, "Narrative in African Philosophy," in *Philosophy vol. 64*, 1989, p. 373.
24. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search*, pp. 238-240.
25. See for example, taped interview of Ali Mwitani Masero, October 6, 1995; interview with the author conducted and translated on site by Chaungo Barasa, later transcribed and translated by Shadrack Wanjala Nasong'o. Tape and transcript in possession of the author. Statements corroborated in further interviews with Chalis Matoka and Okuma Bigambo of Masero's home town, Malaha.
26. Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, quoted in Richard Bell, "Narratives," p. 374. Italics in the original. Bell quotes from Wamba-dia-Wamba's unpublished paper "Experience and Democracy in Africa: Reflections on Practices of Communalist Palaver as a Social Method of Resolving Contradictions Among the People." A French version of this paper is published in *Journal of African Marxists*, no. 7, 1985.
27. Bell, "Narrative," p. 375.
28. J.N. Eindlay, J.N., *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 83.
29. "Philosophy has to be made Sagacious," Interview with H. Odera Oruka by Kai Kresse (Philosophy Department,

University of Hamburg, Germany), at University of Nairobi, August 16, 1995. Published in *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, No. 3, April 1996, Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, The Netherlands.

30. Wairimu Gichohi, "Indigenous African Philosophical Knowledge: A Critique." M.A. Thesis, University of Nairobi, 1996.

31. Appiah, in S. Kwame, *Readings*, p. 12.

32. See for example taped interviews by the author with sages Ali Mwitani Masero (October 6, 1995) and Wanyonyi Manguliechi (October 7, 1995) which were facilitated and translated on site by Chaungo Barasa, and later translated and transcribed by Shadrack Wanjala Nasongto. See also taped interview by the author and H. Odera Oruka with Nicholas Dere Omolo, November 19, 1995. Tapes and transcripts in possession of the author. Limits of space prevent me from here citing the many interesting examples.

33. Appiah, in S. Kwame, *Readings*, p. 15.

THE TELOS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION POLICY

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Affirmative action (AFA) and some types preferential programs (PP) in admission, hiring and contracting are strongly defensible. But AFA is not an end in itself; where it serves as a remedy for the problems of racism, it is justified and, clearly, should be continued. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to review the arguments for AFA. Even given that AFA continues to serve as a important remedy for discrimination faced by qualified African Americans, other ethnic minorities and women, the answer to the question as to *how long* should AFA be continued nevertheless seems to be less clear. What is the *telos* or end-state of AFA policy; what is the good at which it aims? What are the *specific* goals of AFA policy? Are the goals of AFA the sort of goals which even admit of quantitative determination? Given those goals, what would be the observable marks by which we (as a society) could determine when those goals have been met? I invite analysis and criticism of the arguments which follow, and look forward to philosophical discussions of other proposed answers or reformulations of the question in these pages in forthcoming issues.

In my view, it is uncontroversial to say that one of the important problems resulting from racism is the lack of access African Americans had and continue to have to the opportunity to compete (on a basis of fair and equitable competition with other qualified Americans) for the scarce goods and resources in our society, which include education (at all levels), economic security (jobs, positions, promotions), safety of one's person and property, service in elective office, and the respect and equal treatment under law due citizens

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African American Studies

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