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An analysis of Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity manifestation in the Tharaka Community Wise Sayings

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Abstract

This research critically analyzed Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity and its manifestation in Tharaka community wise sayings. Odera Oruka's work primarily centered on identifying and documenting the wisdom of individual sages within African communities, challenging the stereotype that African cultures lack philosophical traditions. By studying Odera Oruka's philosophical sagacity through the lens of Tharaka traditional wise sayings, the research's main objective was to understand the philosophical wisdom endowed and communicated in the community's wise sayings for individual and societal well-being. The need for the study was prompted by an over-emphasis on systematic Western philosophy since scholastic time that has continued to devalue traditional African wisdom which was not only a foundation of African philosophy but also the wisdom behind African traditional societal development. The study used a rational-analytical philosophical approach. Hermeneutics theory which focuses on the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly concerning texts and symbolic content was used. The study was library-based, drawing resources from published and unpublished works, journals, and digital sources. The study found that Tharaka proverbs address themes such as resilience, community solidarity, respect for elders, and learning from experiences. These proverbs serve as a repository of collective knowledge and moral guidance, inviting reflection and discussion among community members. The results align with Oruka's idea that true wisdom involves critical engagement with cultural norms and practical wisdom for daily living.

Keywords: Wise saying; Sagacity; Stereotype; Wisdom; culture; Communal knowledge

1. Introduction

In contemporary academic circles, the study of African philosophy has become increasingly popular as researchers become more aware of the depth and variety of traditional African thought systems. The increase in popularity could be attributed to increased scholarly interests, Indigenous knowledge systems acknowledgment, the emergence of new methodologies, and interdisciplinary collaborations that have increasingly enriched the understanding of traditional thought systems (Odora Hoppers, 2021; Oyekunle, 2021; Sekano & Maditsi, 2024; Silius, 2020). African philosophy is a rich tapestry that is frequently weaved by oral traditions, proverbs, and the collective knowledge of communities (Ndasauka, 2024; Silius, 2020). According to Lajul (2024), Odera Oruka, a renowned philosopher from Kenya, significantly contributed to the acknowledgment of African philosophy by presenting the concept of "philosophic sagacity." His writings refuted the stereotype that African communities are devoid of intellectual ideas by highlighting the presence of unique sages whose knowledge goes beyond customary folklore (Lajul, 2024; Oruka, 1991).

Oruka believed that concepts and wise sayings expressed by indigenous African sages like those of Akoko in the Luo community and Chaungo in the Bukusu community were no different from those expressed by earlier Greek philosophers like Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Pythagoras (Oruka, 1991) and those ideas and wise sayings from Africans wise men and women qualified to be philosophical. Given such a scenario therefore, Oruka was led to

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wonder, why would the sayings of Akoko and Chaungo for example, not be similarly regarded as philosophical after they were committed to writing by a professional philosopher like him.

Tharaka community is one of the Kenyan Bantu-speaking ethnic tribes whose place of origin is believed to be *mbwaa* which means coastal region. Thus, Tharaka community is a community that lives in Kenya on the low plains between the slopes of Mt. Kenya in the west and the upper Tana River East in Tharaka Nithi county. Aatharaka are sub-community of the Ameru community (Kabui, 2015). Tharaka community wise sayings refer to proverbs, idioms, and aphorisms traditionally used by the Tharaka people to convey collective wisdom, moral teachings, and practical advice. The wise sayings of the Tharaka community have rich oral cultural value, however, if not preserved through such endeavors as academic study, there is an existential threat their wealth of knowledge could disappear due to influences from modern society. Therefore, the wise sayings' documentation and analysis not only protect cultural legacy but also emphasize the intellectual contributions made by African societies to world philosophy. The study analyzed these sayings to uncover their underlying philosophical significance.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Much has been written regarding the discussion about philosophic sagacity by African philosophers like Henry Odera Oruka (1991), Hountondji (1996, 2002), and Alexis Kagame (Vidal, 1988), among others. These discussions have been limiting philosophic sagacity to individuals who are considered wise in the African traditional communities, leaving done to sufficiently broaden the concept of philosophic sagacity beyond wise men and women to include wise sayings that carried a lot of wisdom in traditional African communities. Sagacity, well understood should be taken as the epitome of traditional African wisdom. The contentious issue of what makes African traditional wisdom referred to as sagacity to be included in philosophy keeps recurring in philosophical circles, a pointer that the debate is not yet exhaustive but moving in a dialectical formula of thesis to antithesis to synthesis (Oruka, 1987). Kenyan Philosopher, Odera Oruka explored this debate, however, his views still remain under debate, necessitating the need for their critical analysis not only as philosophy per se but also their manifestation in traditional African languages. As a result of this problem exists of a clear and succinct understanding of the rich tapestry of African philosophical thought, expressed in African languages. This has resulted in an over-emphasis on systematic Western thought that is slowly devaluing African thoughts and languages.

1.2. Research Objective

To critically examine how Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity is manifested in Tharaka community wise sayings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Understanding Philosophic Sagacity

Philosophic sage started as a reaction to a position which Europeans and the West had adopted about Africa, that Africans are not capable of philosophy (Oruka, 1987). Therefore, Oruka's idea to counter such a claim was one of the goals of philosophic sage. Oruka (1997) also tried to find out if there was something really African that Africans could bring to the field of philosophy. Philosophic sagacity, therefore, rejects the holistic approach to African philosophy that was more of ethno-philosophy rather than rational, reflective, individualistic, critical, and coherence of thoughts of professional philosophy, (Bodunrin, 1981). The study of a people's general worldviews, traditions, myths, and beliefs was not something that philosophic sagacity promotes. Instead, it is that philosophy that is derived from the thinking or the thought of wise persons who are said to have exceptional wisdom (Bodunrin, 1981). According to Precious (2010), philosophic sagacity is a reflective evaluation of thought by an individual African elder who is a repository of wisdom, knowledge, and rigorous in critical thinking.

The philosophers of philosophic sagacity school of thought argue that African communities should identify men and women who are known for their wisdom and independence of thought, that is, individuals who possess more than a cursory knowledge of the common historical experiences, underlying assumptions, and ideals of their societies. Thus, the philosophies of these enlightened individuals are composed of the thoughts of those who analyzed their existential circumstances thoroughly. Because they consider the communal structure, received wisdom, and their own experiences, they are sages (Oruka, 1991). Therefore, sage philosophy's main goal was to help substantiate or refute the claim by the West that traditional African people were innocent of logical and critical thinking as exemplified by philosophers such as Hegel.

After noting that, according to Bodunrin (1991), African philosophy was to be scientific, which means it was to be structured and/or written. In his response, Oruka asserts that literacy need not be a prerequisite for thinking, that is,

for philosophical reflection and explanation. He shows that despite not being able to read or write, independent thinkers who lived by reason and were capable of critical and dialectical inquiry existed in Africa and communicated their wisdom through the use of language. These independent thinkers propagated authentic African philosophy orally. Their wisdom and opinions can now be put in writing by conversing with professionals.

Bodunrin (1991) distinguished two approaches to philosophic sagacity. The expert philosopher can first go to remote regions and find people who live there who are reputed to be clever and aware of African culture. He or she converses with these knowledgeable philosophers about certain concepts. For example, a professional philosopher could videotape conversations with such intelligent philosophers while they explore their traditional concept of a person. From the several discussions, he or she draws important similarities and gathers the community's perspective on the issue. The interviewer may point out discrepancies, but they should not be coerced into agreeing with the expert philosopher. Follow-up visits could be undertaken to confirm his identity. As a result, the professional philosopher's work is a collective idea of the subject under investigation.

The second strategy according to Bodunrin is that of Odera Oruka and his group. They preserved the ideas of specific Kenyan sages who were unaffected by modern education. In contrast to common thought of the Kenyan Luo tribe, Oruka and his team were documenting the philosophical theories of specific individuals. Oruka and his group were driven by the goal of identifying native Kenyans who have critical thinking skills to prove that native Africans were capable of performing rigorous philosophy (Bodunrin, 1981). This was because Oruka advocated a scenario in which these sage societies' philosophical wisdom was extracted by professional philosophers (Serequeberhan, 1991).

Expert philosophers assist knowledgeable philosophers in "giving birth" to philosophical ideas that are already deeply embedded in the community. While it is possible to argue that the professional philosopher and the wise philosopher collaborated to arrive at the outcome, Bodunrin contends that since both philosophers are actively engaged in the creative process, there is no reason to contest the existence of a philosophy in this particular case (Bodunrin, 1981). According to this, local Africans who have not attended Western schools may be able to think philosophically inside their communities and convey what is known as African wisdom. This is what prompted our study, like Oruka who believed in the existence of wise traditional African thinkers, our study believes that traditional African wise sayings carry a lot of wisdom in them that makes them philosophical.

2.2. Odera Oruka's Philosophic Sagacity in the Context of African Traditional Wisdom

Masolo (2006) pointed out that it is more than four decades since the late Henry Odera Oruka launched what, according to his own branding, has come to be popularly known as "sage philosophy". Sage philosophy came out of a variety of circumstances at a time when "decolonizing the mind" was a popular war cry of the African quest for independence in all its possible forms, that is political, economic, and cultural (Mbembe, 2015; Presbey, 2023). Oruka's contribution to the war of decolonizing the mind was so much inclined to the Africans quest for cultural independence that was slowly devalued by the Western culture that felt it was superior to African cultures (Gandhi, 2018; Ugwuanyi, 2023). His own and his fellow African cultural warriors' mission and vision were so hopeful that one day African cultures and languages would be reserved and give the African people their true cultural identity despite the superiority complex of the Western culture (Oruka, 1997).

Preservation and transmission of African culture is mainly found in the African language and literature. Currently like in a few decades ago, Kenya and other East African countries have made tremendous progress in terms of teaching African language and African literature. This has been exemplified by the writings of various African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Prof. Margret Ogola, Chinua Achebe, and Kithaka wa Mberia among others (Williams, 1999). Their initiative has been always constantly replacing the colonial dominance of European languages and literature with the introduction of rich cultured African language that carries numerous societal wisdom. For example, many East African countries Kenya being part of it have officially accepted introduction of the study of mother tongue languages to the basic education.

Kresse and Nyarwath (2022) pointed out a coincidence between the launch of the "Sage Philosophy" project on one hand, and the launch of the Philosophy Department under the founding leadership of Henry Odera Oruka himself, on the other, as a significant pointer to the chasm that was occurring under the drive of folks in the humanities and social science in the University of Nairobi. In the Historical and cultural circumstances of the time, the phrase "decolonizing the mind" might well have been a translation of *Not Yet Uhuru*, another significant title that adorned the book by Oginga Odinga that captures a complex political angle along the path toward a meaningfully liberated people and their cultures (Ndogo, 2016). Oruka believed firmly that true cultural freedom of language, thoughts, and practice in the sociopolitical and economic domains requires bold but carefully considered philosophical steps to achieve (Oruka, 1991). To achieve

this means the constant problem of devaluing of our African languages by the Western language will be addressed. This is one of the problems that has awakened our study as hinted earlier in our study background.

Caught between the anonymity of ethno-philosophy and the reclusivity of institutionalized philosophical practice, with the latter believed to be molded according to values and standards of the West from which Africans sought to culturally liberate themselves, sage philosophy, was about individuals who, supposedly, were shielded from the Western influence by virtue of having little or no formal education in the Western schools. Therefore, making a sage philosopher one who is truly an African thinker, that is an uncolonized Indigenous intellectual (Kresse & Nyarwath, 2022)

Therefore, sage philosophy is about indigenous sages (African traditional men and women) whose lives are enmeshed in the folk-cultural milieu of their traditional societies. Philosophic Sages have wisdom and great intercultural acumen in critical deliberations on various issues of fundamental concern to themselves and to other members of their societies. According to Oruka (1991), and from the above-discussed concept, sage philosophy consists of 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 and didactic wisdom. Therefore, sage philosophy in general term refers to the body of thought produced by persons considered wise in African communities and more specifically, to those who seek a rational foundation of ideas and concepts used by critically examining the justification of those ideas and concepts (Kresse & Nyarwath, 2022). By popular wisdom, Oruka meant a general conformist to the cultural beliefs, values, and practices within the community, while in didactic wisdom, Oruka meant a critique of the communal set-up and popular wisdom. The thoughts of the wise men and women can be expressed in writing or they can be unwritten sayings and arguments associated with certain individuals. Sage philosophy thus, becomes a type of philosophizing by those with no tradition in the art of writing (Wada et al., 2024). This explains why in traditional Africa, most of what could pass as sage philosophy remains largely unwritten. The concern in the sage philosophy in this research study therefore seeks to look for wisdom in Tharaka ethnic community language that laid the foundation of the values and practices of the members of the community for intellectual peaceful co-existence expressed in wise sayings. Some of the wise sayings may have been partly influenced by the investable moral and technological culture of the West; nevertheless, their outlook and cultural orientation remain that of the traditional Tharaka community.

From the above discussion, it is clear that Henry Odera Oruka beat many odds as he courageously embarked on the path to sage philosophy to justify the superiority of the indigenous traditional culture as exemplified by traditional African individuals who can critically, intellectually, and coherently express their wisdom in the society. The driving force behind the study was to provide more literature on sage philosophy and also to engage robustly with the ideas advanced by the sages, especially in African languages with reference to Tharaka community-wise saying.

This study was based on the theoretical strings of African traditional wisdom, cultural beliefs, and practices expressed in their language as Kwasi Wiredu and Jean Godefroy Bidima believed (Wiredu, 1996). The late Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu was long engaged in discussion with Oruka on some fundamental philosophical issues, he exemplified magisterially to us how research on sage philosophy can be done (Kresse & Nyarwath, 2022). Kwasi Wiredu's philosophy engaged universal philosophical problems while remaining thoroughly African. His impact and contribution to philosophy as a discipline in general was that he offered solutions to some universal philosophical problems that western both European and American philosophers were not able to resolve on their own (Wiredu, 1996). On the other hand, Jean Godefroy Bidima (1993) like Kwasi Wiredu, shows how Africans modes offer better solutions to hard social, moral, legal, and political problems where, again, Western approaches, as practiced by either Westerners themselves or as adopted by Africans as part of colonial legacy show theoretical (Bidima, 1993; Irabor & Andrew, 2020; Onebunne, 2023). Therefore, Kwasi Wiredu and Bidima both showed how well universal philosophizing can be done while the debate is grounded, for comparative purposes, on one or more cultural resource platform.

2.3. Indigenous Traditional African Thinkers

In Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy (Oruka, 1991), Oruka differentiates six trends in contemporary African Philosophy. He names them as ethno-philosophy, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, philosophic sagacity, professional philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy, and artistic-literacy philosophy (Oruka, 1991; Onebunne, 2023). Briefly, ethno-philosophy is defined as the study of traditional thought and beliefs, while nationalistic-ideological philosophy studies the thoughts of African political leaders as an important stage in the development of African philosophy (Hountondji, 1996). According to Hountondji (1996), professional philosophy is the work of intellectuals who have received specialized philosophical training and have for their object a wide range of issues, including even specifically African themes. Hermeneutic philosophy is referred to as the philosophical analysis of concepts in a given African language that helps in clarifying the meaning and logical implications of language (Hermans, 2019). Artistic or literary philosophy is defined as both the explicit philosophical reflections volunteered by

the creative spirits of contemporary Africa and the philosophies implicit in these works, be they poems, novels, plays, and so on (Oruka, 1991). Certainly, there are no iron walls between these divisions and one philosophical trend could easily overlap with another. As Oruka himself points out that philosophical trends classification is a liberal classification for African philosophers in Africa to identify philosophy in the strict sense from philosophy in the broad and all-embracing sense.

Of special importance from the philosophical trends discussed above is what Oruka defines as *sage philosophy* and *philosophic sagacity*. Sage philosophy or philosophic sagacity were supposed to be the views of indigenous African thinkers as they were yet largely uninfluenced by Western ideas. Thus:

Sage philosophy consists of these 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 a rational thought of some given individuals within a community) (Oruka, 1991).

Mosima (2022) notes that unlike ethno-philosophy which is communal and holistic in approach to philosophy, sage philosophy is non-holistic in approach, underscoring the thoughts of individuals in a community. To stress the point even further, Oruka distinguishes between folk sagacity and philosophic sagacity.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

2.4.1. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, derived from the Greek word “hermeneuein,” meaning “to interpret,” is a field of study that focuses on the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly concerning texts and symbolic content (Hermans, 2019). Historically rooted in biblical exegesis, hermeneutics has evolved to encompass a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, literature, law, and social sciences. The significance of hermeneutics lies in its ability to facilitate understanding by situating texts within their historical and cultural contexts (Hermans, 2019). The wise sayings often encapsulate collective wisdom passed down through generations (Oruka, 1991). By employing a hermeneutic approach, researchers can analyze these sayings not merely as isolated phrases but as reflections of broader cultural narratives. For instance, consider a saying that emphasizes communal values over individualism. A hermeneutic analysis would involve exploring how this saying reflects Tharaka societal structures, norms regarding kinship ties, or communal responsibilities. Such an analysis requires situating these sayings within their specific socio-historical contexts—examining factors such as colonial history or post-colonial identity formation that may influence contemporary interpretations.

3. Methods

The study was library-based, drawing resources from published and unpublished works, journals as well as digital sources. This study adopted a qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The use of qualitative methods worked especially effectively for research that needed a thorough comprehension of intricate and subtle phenomena. These philosophical and cultural components could be explored in great detail through qualitative approaches, which were able to pick up on intricacies and complexities that quantitative methods could have missed (Cresswell, 2013). The approach that was selected was adopted because it was interpretive. This study's interpretive research questions center on comprehending and elucidating philosophical ideas and cultural wisdom. A fundamental element of qualitative research, hermeneutic analysis was necessary for analyzing texts and revealing hidden meanings within their historical and cultural contexts. This approach was ideal for achieving the goal of the research, which was to contextualize and analyze the wise sayings of Tharaka and the philosophical writings of Oruka.

The research analyzed both literal and philosophical meanings in the wise sayings. It went further to analyze the logic in the wise sayings. Ten Tharaka community wise sayings were sampled and analyzed to achieve the objective. This was done by placing the wise saying in a context before analyzing its literal, and philosophical meanings

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of these wise sayings revealed critical engagement with cultural norms, moral education, social cohesion promotion, and critical thinking as key manifestations of Odera Oruka's Sagacity in Tharaka community wise sayings. Proverbs and wise sayings from Tharaka serve as a means of challenging and reinterpreting cultural behaviors, in addition to being reflections of traditional beliefs. Oruka's concept of philosophic sagacity, which highlights the role of

individual thinkers in evaluating and occasionally opposing societal ideals, is centered on this critical engagement with cultural norms. Members of the Tharaka community are prompted to consider their cultural traditions through these proverbs, making sure that they are in line with more general ethical standards and enhance communal life.

The wise sayings of Tharaka not only interact with cultural norms but also have a major impact on moral education, which is another essential component of philosophic sagacity. These proverbs frequently serve as instruments for teaching moral behavior and directing people in their dealings with others because they capture moral truths that have been passed down through the generations. These proverbs provide moral lessons that are subject to interpretation and modification as a culture changes. Oruka's conception of sagacity, in which knowledge is actively produced and polished via critical thought and lived experience rather than just inherited, is consistent with the dynamic character of moral teaching through wise sayings.

Another important example of philosophic sagacity in the wise sayings of the Tharaka society is the encouragement of social cohesiveness. These proverbs frequently stress the value of harmony, cooperation, and respect between members of society, thereby reiterating the notion that the welfare of the individual is intimately related to the welfare of the group. Tharaka proverbs that emphasize the need to maintain social harmony and the perils of conflict help to retain strong ties within the community. This facet of social cohesiveness is essential to Oruka's idea of sagacity because it emphasizes how wisdom helps society develop a feeling of shared identity and duty.

Still, it was noted that the wise sayings of the Tharaka community encourage critical thinking, which is essential to philosophical sagacity. These proverbs encourage people to examine deeply and have a conversation about their meaning and use rather than only being prescriptive. Tharaka wise sayings cultivate a culture of deliberate contemplation and well-informed decision-making by promoting critical analysis of commonplace circumstances. This focus on critical thinking is consistent with Oruka's definition of sagacity, which holds that wisdom is defined by the capacity to challenge presumptions, take into account other viewpoints, and reach well-reasoned conclusions. The Tharaka community exemplifies Oruka's vision of a society in which philosophical inquiry is a group endeavor based on both personal insight and collective knowledge through these sage sayings.

The analysis shows that African traditional wisdom, which is primarily communal, is intricately entwined with Oruka's philosophic sagacity. Individual sages' wisdom frequently mirrors the cultural narratives, beliefs, and collective experiences of their societies (Agada & Van Norden, 2021). This collective dimension is essential to comprehending African philosophy because it emphasizes the relationship between unique ideas and the larger social environment in which they are rooted. By bridging individual and collective wisdom, Oruka's method demonstrates how African philosophy is a result of both private contemplation and shared understanding.

Moreover, the examination emphasizes how crucial it is to acknowledge the collective basis of philosophic sagacity since it offers a more comprehensive comprehension of African traditional knowledge (Kebede, 1999). Through recording the knowledge of individual sages, Oruka enhanced the philosophical conversation worldwide by bringing a viewpoint that honors both individual and collective contributions to knowledge, while also validating African philosophy. This examination of Oruka's writings advances our understanding of African traditional knowledge as a multifaceted and rich intellectual heritage.

5. Conclusion

Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity effectively demonstrated that African societies possess rich philosophical traditions. By documenting the wisdom of individual sages, Oruka validated African philosophy and showcased its depth and complexity. His work bridged the gap between oral and written traditions, ensuring the preservation and accessibility of African wisdom.

Tharaka community's wise sayings vividly illustrate the principles of philosophic sagacity. These sayings reflect the community's collective wisdom and cultural values, emphasizing critical engagement with life's challenges and moral guidance. Tharaka proverbs, thus, exemplify the rich philosophical traditions present in African societies and align with Oruka's vision of philosophic sagacity.

Recommendations

This article recommends that scholars should continue to document and analyze the wisdom of individual sages and communal knowledge across various African communities. This will further validate and preserve African philosophical traditions. Also, it is crucial to encourage interdisciplinary research that integrates philosophy, anthropology, and

cultural studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of African wisdom. This approach can help uncover deeper insights into the interconnectedness of individual and communal knowledge.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

There are no possible conflicts of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

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