

NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN PAST PRACTICES AND FUTURE THOUGHTS IN A TRANSITIONAL KENYAN CULTURE MODEL, FOR SUSTAINABLE FAMILY LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

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I – ‘Thought and Practice’ 25 years ago

Thought and Practice was the title of a journal published by the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) between 1974 and mid-1980s. The great philosopher Odera Oruka was its founding editor. He was assisted by among others, Joseph Donders, Aziz Esmail and Joseph Nyasani. The journal featured eloquent thoughts and discourses of brilliant intellectuals from East Africa and beyond on the practical challenges facing post-independent Africa in areas such as culture and religion, governance, law, school curricula, and technological development. Looking back on the literary fecundity of that age (hardly a quarter century ago) one is compelled to concede that the second generation of post – independent African philosophers is yet to conceive their contribution, let alone deliver.

It was indeed in the inaugural issue of that journal that Odera Oruka wrote, in an essay titled “Philosophy and other Disciplines”:

Since colonialism, African societies have great cultural defects and confusions. In Africa the need for cultural cure, for cultural light is as

important as the need to have a fellow African (not a European) as a head of state. Philosophy is useful to society in the sense that it contributes greatly to the foundation of the standard appeal of the culture of the society. In an African country, the need for a cultural platform, for cultural authenticity, for cultural (moral-social) development is also the need for philosophy.¹

Earlier on, the great poet Okot p’Bitek and many others had pondered this dilemma, questioning the African philosophies (or thought systems) upon which we were founding our post- independent institutions².

II – A case for cultural equilibrium, or Family Livelihood Security.

In this essay, I revisit the matter of future cultural sanity for Africa by examining the typical “modern” Kenyan family unit, which is under chaotic transition. I argue that through sagacious re-examination and choice, Kenyan families, and hence the nation, can realize a sense of cultural equilibrium. This cultural realm I term *cultural family livelihood security (CFLS)*. In the NGO and relief world where I work,

there exists a buzzword which is quickly gaining currency: *Household Livelihood Security (HMLS)*. HMLS refers to a developmental state where households have achieved sustainable access to food, shelter, health, education and income generation. Such families may be regarded at least 'secure' from a perilous level of existence where life is a daily struggle for the basic ingredients of survival.

In a parallel context, one would equate *Cultural Family Livelihood Security* with a developmental state whereby a typical family has realized and lives by distinct (even if heterogeneous) cultural practices backed by consistent thought and belief systems.

There are five important cultural tensions in the "modern" Kenyan family life which are in a state of continuous flux. To realize a harmonious state of cultural practice and thought involves a re-examination of these five. The five revolve around the misconceptions of modernity versus tradition; death and burial; marriage and inheritance; inter-family and clan relations; and leadership and role modeling. Everything else ranging from the diversity of languages to the pluralism of educational and political nuances can be discussed within this scope. A cultural equilibrium, or CFLS, entails sagacious re-examination of daily life dilemmas posed under the auspices of these five cultural tensions, leading to informed choices.

III - The place for sage philosophy in the CFLS process

As Odera Oruka and students of practical philosophy contend, philosophy, since it deals with issues of existential cognition and moral appeal, is indeed a well placed vehicle for informing and influencing cultural tenets and practices. Sage philosophy, an African philosophical

system with less than three decades of formal existence, is increasingly asserting its suitability as a philosophical counseling tool.³ In her writings on sage philosophy during the past five years, the philosopher from the USA, Gail Presbey, has elaborately explained the significant role sages can play in mediating and resolving everyday life tensions and conflicts in the community⁴. And Jannie Malan in *Conflict Resolution Wisdom from Africa* (ACCORD, 1997) demonstrates how Africa's rich heritage of sagacious beliefs and thought can be applied to the resolution of post-independent conflicts and problems of underdevelopment.

An apparent handicap for sage philosophy is the misleading viewpoints by some of its romantic critics like Dismas Masolo, Bruce Janz and Francis Owakah regarding the notion of a sage⁵. According to this image, a sage is a rural, illiterate and wise old man living within the traditional values, customs and moral dictates of his community, whose cultural world-view he propagates. He is also expected, one infers from Janz's writings, to be 'clean' and unadulterated by exposure to Western thought systems. Odera Oruka and other Sagists including myself have already discounted this retrogressive definition of a sage.⁶ A sage, in essence, pursues wisdom. Wisdom, as I have defined it before, is awareness of the real nature of things, the capacity to distinguish between truth and falsehood. But that, by definition, is an attribute that cannot be pegged on purely physical properties such as age or class or residence. Formal learning as Odera has already argued in *Sage Philosophy*, indeed hones one's skills and capacity of re-examining and communicating wisdom. However, it alone cannot be a criterion for wisdom, and hence for a sage. A sage then may be young and highly sophisticated; learned and cosmopolitan or a female, illiterate and

old villager. I believe that the brilliance and prudence demonstrated in public and literary life by people like James Orenge, Nyerere, Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, Mother Theresa, Okot p'Bitek, Chinua Achebe, Charles Dickens, Mahatma Gandhi, Odera Oruka, Bertrand Russell, Ogotemelli, Confucius, Emmanuel (Jesus) and of course the eternal Socrates, surpasses the realm of mere academic letters or cocooned scholarship. Their deeds manifest an unmistakable strain of sagacity. In our own urban estates, villages, theatres, offices, political arenas, and universities, we definitely have sages or at least Sagists who via their varied stations in life can help families bridge gaps between cultural practices and belief systems in modern-day Kenya. They may accomplish this via literary works, public counseling sessions as is already happening in USA and South Africa, puritanism and role modeling by those in public offices and of course intellectual debates and intercourse.

IV – Today's typical 'modern' Kenyan family unit.

Kwame Gyekye, arguably the most published contemporary African philosopher on the subject of tradition and modernity after Odera Oruka and Kwasi Wiredu, views the African family as a suitable foundation for cultural and moral values. Says he:

The family is an effective instrument for the moral education and, thus, the development and inculcation of moral values; but it does play an important role also in the practical moral life of an individual member. A strong family system thus in many ways serves both as an important moral support and a motivating factor. This helps to reduce the number of moral offences and criminal acts that are committed by

young people. Responsible men and women in the family who are *morally upright and sensitive* talk to young people about their wayward moral behaviour and help to guide them to proper behaviour⁷ (emphasis added).

The "responsible" man or woman could as well be a sagacious neighbor or renowned literary author. (Note that Odera Oruka and Gail Presbey also attach a normative value and calling to sagacity.) By choosing the family unit as a basis for rationalizing a future cultural equilibrium for Kenya, we obtain leverage to deal with the problematic of national culture from its basic building blocks.

In present day Kenya, the tension between tradition and modernity is still very rife. Even more problematic is the gap between the practices and pronouncements (beliefs) of the proportion of those who regard themselves as living a 'modern' lifestyle characterized by features we shall come to shortly. Though the 'modern' family hardly constitutes 35% of today's Kenyan families, it is nevertheless the family of the future and thus worthy of focus. The other predominant family model, the African-culturalist or simply *Africanist*, is of course already touched by the tradition-versus-modernity dichotomy. But unlike the modernists, a majority of the Africanists are yet to be exposed to the epicenter of the conflict which is aggravated through the vagaries of urbanization, economic survival and tribo-feudal nationalism.

What characterizes the so-called modern family in Kenya? We can identify the following features: a flawed conception of modernity as Euro-American cultures and religions; a stunted understanding of indigenous cultures and traditions which is compensated for by an equally rudimentary and incoherent grasp of Euro-American (and therefore 'modern')

lifestyles; a pervasive desire for and preoccupation with materialism, consumption and status symbols and an equation of this with excellence and role modeling; schooling, learning and sophistication – which includes a restless appetite for acquisition or consumption of pop life styles; a conflict in the family language of choice (European, Kiswahili or vernaculars?); a half-hearted effort at individualism (as opposed to communalism); a pretentious blue collar work-ethic which in real fact is propped up by free helpings to the employer's or public's property; a morbid but carefully rationalized and well camouflaged fear and distaste for rural folks and environments; a crushing inability to divorce completely from the often loudly expressed distaste for traditions, resorting to expedient or feigned embrace and rejection, as per circumstances; a carefully suppressed gender oppression otherwise inconsistent with a truly modern lifestyle; a reluctant embrace for population control for which responsibility is handed over entirely to the woman partner; incessant grumbling against the status quo, with a numbing inertia or fear to criticize openly; and finally, a stupendous tendency to be bought and manipulated by political barons and ruling cliques. If your life is characterized by most or all of these features (do not mind the pinch of the descriptions) then indeed you belong to or are headed for the Kenyan *modern family*.

Of course, to the right and left of this model lies varying shades of modernity (with, I must add, more benign adjectives) to which each family will prefer to embrace. In *Ethics* (Nairobi University Press, 1990) Odera Oruka has listed up to seven categories of religious value contributing towards the cultural tenets of contemporary Kenya. But regardless of any amount of variegations, the core feature is one: a sub-culture in search of equilibrium, families

and individuals in want of Cultural Livelihood Security. Our “*modern*” family in Kenya today is like the two-headed snake: torn between two directions, it can only wriggle and scare, rooted in the same spot. Void of sound wealth resources and/or solid cultural heritage upon which the Euro-American class structures and African communal brotherhoods are built, the *modern* Kenyan family is only a bad caricature of both. To realize a state of equilibrium, the main cultural forces at play as observed in *modern* family life have to be re-examined.

V – Five major cultural tensions at play in the *modern* family.

1. Misconception of tradition and modernity
2. The perpetual dispute regarding death and burial sites and rites
3. Marriage and “wife inheritance” (actually, *estate guardianship*)
4. Inter-family and intra-nation relations
5. Indices of leadership and modeling.

I hope to illustrate these tensions in more graphic detail in a later version of this essay. Here, I will describe in brief outline the dichotomy between belief (or thought) and practice that daunts the lifestyles of our *modern* Kenyan family as well as elite individuals and groups:

- Public pronouncements for indigenous cultural values and practices that fly in the face of a expedient and wholesale gluttony for foreign ideas and lifestyles.
- We talk against customs that insist on interring remains of the dead in their ancestral homes but our political and doctrinaire definition of ‘home’ involves tracing citizens back to their villages and clans. (Even in this 21st century, identity - the *Kipande*- and census statistics in Kenya still

emphasize and document the ‘clan and “*mlango*” skeletons for reasons far from altruistic or developmental.)

- While we condemn many indigenous customs and values for no reason beyond extravagance, we spend hundreds of thousands in funds and work-hours arranging and hosting Victorian style weddings which a *modern* Londoner would regard *outdated*.
- We disparage the extended family model as expensive and unwieldily, but spend a lot of resources on entertainment for friends.
- We pay lip service to gender equity but still continue to deprive our wives of a say in the economics and property ownership of the family. Through all manner of sly rationalizations, we continue to deny the girl-child succession rights.
- We condemn past leadership models for the penchant for corruption in our ruling class. But in practice, we identify societal role modeling with wealth (even ill gotten), power and mediocrity.
- A tendency to confuse Western or Eastern cultural values and customs with “modern” cultures of the peoples of those continental regions.
- We deride ‘wife inheritance’ (what Odera Oruka has more appropriately identified as *guardianship*) and blame

the customs for all evils including AIDS virus, but we do articulate a “modern” cultural rationale through which millions of poor widows and orphans would be protected and assisted following the demise of their sole breadwinners.

The list goes on.

VI- Conclusion:

The message is clear: there is a yawning abyss between what the *modern* Kenyan family and *elite* says and believes, and what lifestyle it practices or lives. Bridging the gap between belief and practice involves a conscientious, informed and innovative effort at the family level to reexamine and broaden one’s knowledge of the status quo (both ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’). The final goal would be cultural household security at the family level and cultural equilibrium at the national level. Only then could we be well placed to redress the myriad of political and social ills that afflict Kenya at the turn of the 21st century. Sage philosophy, alongside other social schools of thought has a legitimate role to play in this CFLS process. We need to search for sages who can engage our communities in wise and insightful discussions, to help us bridge the gaps between beliefs and practices, and traditions and modernity, in modern Kenyan families.

Notes and References

- 1 *Thought and Practice*, Vol.1 no. 1, (1974), East African Literature Bureau, pp 36.
- 2 p'Bitek, Okot Africa's Cultural Revolution (1973) Macmillan; Ali Mazrui, (1986) *The Africans, a Triple Heritage* BBC, e.g. on pp 20 -21 and pp 257-259; Kwame Gyekye, (1997) *Tradition and Modernity* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- 3 Lou Marinoff, (1999) in *Plato, not Prozac: Applying Philosophy to Everyday Problems* New York: Harper Collins, demonstrates the superiority of philosophy to psychology/psychiatry as a counseling and mediation tool.
- 4 See for example Presbey, Gail in what I regard her most seminal essay on sage philosophy entitled: "African Sage-Philosophers in Action: H. Odera Oruka's Challenges to The Narrowly Academic Role of the Philosopher." *Essence: An International Journal of Philosophy* (Nigeria), Vol. 1, No. 1, June 1996, pp 29-41.
- 5 Dr. Masolo, Dismas, is well known for his famous saying that mere pithy sayings do not make rural and illiterate elders philosophers. See D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), p 241. His student Owakah has said as much in a 1998 essay skeptical of Sage philosophy. Bruce Janz in an essay entitled "Thinking Wisdom: the Hermeneutical Basis of Sage Philosophy" in *African Philosophy* (Vol. 2 No. 1, 1998) more or less (despite his open denial) consigns Sage Philosophy to the *ash-heap*, the reason being that Sage Philosophy is not completely free from western critique systems and methods.
- 6 Oruka, Odera, in the seminal text, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991). Also, Chaungo, Barasa in the essay "The elders complex: the myth of age and learning as wisdom" (1995, unpublished).
- 7 Gyekye, Kwame. *African cultural values: An Introduction* (Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996).