

# **A CONTINUING STUDY ON SAGE PHILOSOPHY: EMPHASIS ON JARAMOGI OGINGA ODINGA**

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## **Introduction**

A study by H. Odera Oruka in 1974 continues to demonstrate the need for a thorough re-appraisal of the commonly held belief that Africans lack a philosophy. My thesis in this study aims at building arguments on Oruka's Sage philosophy, which can be termed as a contemporary trend in African philosophy. The elaboration of this thesis will include providing practical examples of sage philosophy in the works and politics of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga.<sup>1</sup>

The approach of the present analysis will be to use Odinga's politics as a reference point while trying to show how Oruka answers basic questions about sage philosophy and leaves an indelible mark on African philosophy. The present discussion shall refer to philosophy among other things as: a human reflection on life and nature, on what there is and what could be.<sup>2</sup> Following in the footsteps of Oruka, sage philosophy can be defined as comprising 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 (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).<sup>3</sup>

The concrete purpose of Oruka's study of sage philosophy was to deny the claim that

traditional African peoples were innocent of intellectual rigour and thus automatically lacked individuals with ratiocinative abilities. Oruka leaves a mark by showing via "sagacious didactics" (which involves an interview or discussion going on endlessly through twists and turns)<sup>4</sup> that traditional Africans were capable of logical and methodical reasoning.

Sage philosophy can be divided into two categories: popular or folk sagacity, and philosophic sagacity. The former is a body of basic principles and tenets that underlie and justify the belief, customs and practices of a given culture.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the folk sage is bound by the community's culture, values and norms in a conservative enterprise. The folk sage can be called a good student of the community's culture and values, and also participates in policing those values. The folk sage can be compared to a poet who can recite, or a geographer who can describe his area with much competence. Folk sages are also identifiable by their consistent inability to isolate their own opinions from the beliefs of the community and their ready inclination to take refuge behind the popular wisdom whenever they are intellectually challenged.<sup>6</sup> The failure of the folk sage to apply critical objections to folk beliefs makes him or her fall into the category of "traditionalist."

The philosophic sage, like the folk sage, knows the cardinal beliefs and wisdom of his or her community, and then goes ahead

to question independently what other people take for granted. This critical analysis is second order philosophy *per se*. The philosophic sage re-evaluates the underlying beliefs of the community and comes up with an independent stand that can differ markedly from the community's. The philosophic sage is thus fully comparable with Socrates who questioned knowledge based on authority and tried to come up with a new form of knowledge. The philosophic sage is skeptical of communal agreements and employs an open mind to test communal conformity.

The question to be posed here is: does one need to become a folk sage first before going ahead to become a philosophic sage? It may be argued that for one to be a philosophic sage, he or she must be well versed with the traditions, values and norms of the community. For, if he or she has to criticize the values, he or she must have a basis for this. We cannot criticize or question what we do not have or know. For instance the continued study and criticism of sage philosophy can only take place if we have the basis. Sage philosophy can only be developed if most of Oruka's works on illiterate sages can be augmented by a study on living literate sages who are suggested by the community in which the sages are residing. Perhaps if we study the works of statesmen or some politicians (what Oruka classifies as nationalist-ideological philosophy)<sup>7</sup> we may soon discover that a continued study of philosophy will eventually intertwine or merge with nationalist-ideological philosophy. Maybe Ali Mazrui had this in mind when he wrote that Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania is the example *par excellence* of the sage ruler, and the foremost exponent of the use of documentary radicalism to impart a ruler's teaching to his countrymen.<sup>8</sup> Oruka accepts that Nyerere is a sage.

The study of literate sages, however, can be complicated by the fact that they possess western education. This can be controversial as it can be argued that it does not qualify as authentic African philosophy. In addition, many modern youth criticize African traditions without necessarily understanding the underlying concepts behind them. Among the Luos of Kenya, brothers must marry in descending order, the older brother marrying first. Most Luo youth criticise this without keeping the underlying concept of respect in mind. This denies them the status of a sage philosopher since a sage philosopher must first be familiar with a tradition in order to be able to criticise it properly.

### Relation between the Sage and the Philosopher

Oruka states that sages have at least two abilities: insight and ethical inspiration.<sup>9</sup> He indirectly agrees that though a sage may be a philosopher and vice-versa, the sage goes further than some philosophers by being wise. This means that the term "sage" means more than the term "philosopher." This is why I tend to think that a study of some of African politicians will eventually show that some of their thought and practice will mean moving them from the nationalist-ideological philosophy category into philosophic sagacity. Nyerere may eventually prove to be a sage philosopher, while Nkrumah might remain in nationalist-ideological philosophy, the reason being that Nyerere manifests insight and wisdom by being much more in line with the needs of his people than the more highflown and abstruse theorizing of Nkrumah.<sup>10</sup> This may lead to the question, must the philosopher have extraordinary practical skills to qualify as a sage? This is our next preoccupation.

### **Emphasis on Jaramogi Oginga Odinga**

Jaramogi Oginga Odinga of Bondo District, Nyanza Province, was Kenya's Vice-President between 1963 and April 1966, when he surrendered public office as Vice President of Kenya, and announced that he could no longer support the government's policies at home and abroad. Odinga became *Ker* (ultimate spiritual and political leader of the Luos) in 1954.<sup>11</sup> He was known as the doyen of opposition politics in Kenya. He became the Chief opposition leader in parliament after Kenya's multi-party elections in 1992. He passed away in 1994, aged 83 years.

Oginga Odinga is taken here as a reference point because of his political acumen which left both his friends and foes admiring his skills. His contribution to human kind and unquestionable mix of nationalistic, traditional and modern norms are fascinating. Like Nyerere he was a man of the masses. If ethnicity and royalism were not factors in politics, then Odinga's ideology would have made him the ultimate occupant of this country's highest political post. The emphasis on Odinga is justified on the grounds that he practiced politics both as thought (ideal), and practically. He was a committed leader who endured untold hardships in the cause of justice and democracy. We know that real political leadership does not come with the urge to achieve quick results. As he states, politics involves confronting difficult objective circumstances with the subjective will that is committed to a purpose.

Oginga Odinga in manifesting didactic wisdom employed analytical and reflective methodology, all of which are prerequisites of philosophy. There are numerous examples which show how Odinga expressed didactic wisdom. To start with,

in his role in a legal tussle, Odinga criticized the Umira Kager clan, which was engaged in a court standoff with the widow of a Nairobi based criminal lawyer (S.M. Otieno)<sup>12</sup>. The clan insisted that Otieno be buried in his ancestral land in Nyamila Village, Nyalgunga Sub-Location in Central Alego, Siaya District about 300 miles away from Nairobi. Odinga, despite being a Luo,<sup>13</sup> argued that a Luo could be buried anywhere in Kenya, thus meaning that Wambui Otieno, the widow, could bury her husband in his upper Matasia farm in Ngong, a few miles from Nairobi. Such critical wisdom did not please the Luo community in Nairobi.

It is popularly accepted among many people that morality belongs to the church and should not have a place in the political arena. In other words, the best politician is seen as the one who is not preoccupied with ethical issues such as truth, honesty and candidness. The best politician thrives on lies. Odinga rejects this notion by stating that politics should be based on the moral-honour conception of power.<sup>14</sup> Odinga was also against the philosophy of the "strong" as the embodiment of justice: for him, power should be endorsed as the moral honour and not as the radiation of might.

Wisdom, it can be contended, is a quality which enables a person to utilize knowledge of his traditions and human nature and objective judgement about life and human reasoning. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga exemplified this kind of reflection on life in his prophecies and ontology. He stated that he had no special secrets but did understand human relations. In early 1991, he stated that by being a good student of world events (relations between north and south) he predicted the returning of the multi-party system to Kenya. This was an objective judgement in that with the collapse of communism and hence the

end of cold war, African states were required by the West to change their political system. In 1967, Odinga proclaimed that Kenya was in a state which was NOT YET UHURU. The talk of a second liberation of Kenya was later heard in the last decade (1990s). Odinga shows the two abilities of a sage - insight and ethical inspiration.

Odinga shows ethical inspiration by his love for truth, justice and freedom. In ethics, one grapples with all three. As much as abstract reasoning about the three concepts can take place, we know that one needs extraordinary practical skills to practice them. Odinga qualifies here by his belief in truth as that which never perishes. His special liking for truth made him differ with the first President of Kenya.<sup>15</sup> He could have chosen to keep quiet and take the presidency. He did oppose what to him seemed unjust, and thus had his position relinquished from the throes of power. Among the unjust for Odinga were more-so revolving around the land question. He even refuted the popularly held opinion among his Luo kinsmen that Kikuyus were wealthy. To him there were a few affluent Kikuyus in a patch of very many poor ones. Kikuyus were the ones who were most affected by the land crisis.

Folk sagacity as earlier postulated is a raw material for philosophic sagacity. Odinga Odinga fits into this as a possessor of popular wisdom. Odinga was installed as *Ker*, in the sense that he defended Luo norms and values. One could only be a defender of his or her community norms and values if he or she is well versed in it.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Oginga Odinga should be considered a sage because he expressed and defended philosophical counseling on various issues of nature and human life. He was concerned with moral issues in politics and had metaphysical concerns about the nature of human beings. He was concerned with empirical political issues and political philosophy. Odinga qualifies as a sage because the Luo community supported what he said even if it contradicted Luo customs. For example his backing of Wambui Otieno did not stop the Luos from endearing themselves to him despite the fact that Oginga Odinga was against a Luo tradition.

Samuel Enoch Stumpf appropriately states that Descartes broke with the past and gave philosophy a fresh start. In particular, since his system of truth would have to be derived from one's own rational powers he would no longer rely on previous philosophers for his idea of truth, merely because it was expressed by someone with authority. Neither the authority of Aristotle's great reputation nor the authority of the Church could suffice to produce the kind of certainty Descartes sought.<sup>16</sup> As much as the label philosopher could apply to Descartes then it can apply to Odinga. Odinga questioned the well-known Luo communal maxims and authority of the first Kenyan President, all in search of truth. Detentions and arrests could not stop him from producing the kind of certainty he sought. A continued study of sage philosophy requires the endeavor of all committed to the development of African philosophy.

## Notes and References

1. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga was a Kenyan politician who passed away in 1994.
2. Oruka, H. O., (1991) *Sage Philosophy :Indigenous Thinkers and modern Debate on African Philosophy* Nairobi: ACTS Press, pp 8.
3. *Ibid.* pp 33.
4. *Ibid.* pp 34
5. Ochieng-Odhiambo, F., (1995) *African Philosophy: An Introduction* Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, pp 82.
6. Oruka, H.O., (1990) *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, pp 56.
7. *Ibid.* p 17.
8. Michael, T. and Mazrui, A., (1984) *Nationalism and New States in Africa* Nairobi: Heinemann International, pp 188.
9. Oruka, H.O., (1991) *op.cit.* pp 8.
10. Michael, T. and Mazrui, A., *op.cit.* pp 188.
11. Ogutu, G.E.M., (1995) *Ker Jaramogi is Dead; Who Shall Lead my People?* Kisumu; Palwa Research Services Limited, pp 15.
12. Otieno, S.M. was a Nairobi criminal lawyer and a Luo by tribe. He married a Kikuyu. He was eventually buried in Nyalgunga after a protracted legal tussle. Odera Oruka was invited by Otieno Kwach (the Umira Kager lawyer and now a judge in the Kenyan court of appeal), to give evidence as an authority in sage philosophy.
13. Luos claim that one of their own should be buried in their ancestral land lest he/she haunt the living relatives. This is seen as the proper burial place.
14. Odera Oruka, H. (1992) *Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs.* Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, pp 98.
15. Kenyatta was Kenya's first president who ruled from 1963 to 1978, when he passed away. He ruled Kenya in the elder tradition rather than the sage tradition.
16. Stumpf, S.E. (1982) *Socrates To Sartre: A History of Philosophy* (3rd edition) McGraw-Hill Publishers, pp 229.