

# **H. Odera Oruka: A Biographical Sketch**

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H. Odera Oruka was born on 1st June 1944 in Ugenya, now part of Siaya County in the Western part of Kenya. After his primary, secondary and advanced level studies in Kenya, he went to Uppsala University in Sweden where he registered for a B.Sc programme in the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science. He studied Meteorology, Geography and Geodesy, but on his own initiative and interest added Philosophy as an optional course. Upon graduation in Science and Philosophy (a year ahead of his class), he opted to drop science and continue with philosophy, a choice which cost him his scholarship (Oruka 1997, 281). He accompanied his professor of philosophy, Ingemar Hedenius, who had influenced his shift to philosophy, from Sweden to Wayne State University in the US for his Masters degree (Oruka 1997, 171). He wrote his masters dissertation under the supervision of Hedenius on the concept of punishment in 1969, which he later refined and published under the title *Punishment and Terrorism in Africa* in 1976. After completing his masters in a year at Wayne State University, Oruka went back with Hedenius to Uppsala University, where he got admission for his doctorate in philosophy, obtaining his PhD on the concept of freedom in 1970, a work which he later developed and published into a book, *Philosophy of Liberty: An*

*Essay on Political Philosophy* in 1991. On 4<sup>th</sup> June 1993, he received an Honorary Doctorate degree (Fil. Dr. *Honoris Causa*), from Uppsala University.

In October 1970, Oruka joined the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi, where he taught until his death on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1995. When the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies was launched at the University of Nairobi in 1969, most of the teaching staff there were priests and lay theologians who had little time for African Philosophy (Oruka 1990a, 126). They did not believe that Africans have the ability to think logically. After nine years of a sustained bitter struggle spearheaded by Odera Oruka, he succeeded in having philosophy separated from religious studies in July 1980, and was appointed the founder-Chairman of the new Department of Philosophy (Oruka 1990a, 126-127; 1997, 233; Masolo 1997, 233). The exit of D.A. Masolo from the department and the death of Odera Oruka marked the decline of the international profile of philosophy at the University of Nairobi, which had been best known for African philosophy. In 2005, the Department of Philosophy at the University of Nairobi was once again merged with the Department of Religious Studies (Nyarwath 2009, 18). However, the merger is administrative rather than disciplinary, because it is impossible to merge the two distinct disciplines.

Oruka published over fifty articles, authored and/or edited several books, some of which are *Philosophy and Cultures: Proceedings of the 2nd Afro-Asian Philosophy Conference* (1983; co-edited with D.A. Masolo), *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* (1990a), *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (1990/1991), *Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs* (1992), *Philosophy, Humanity and Ecology* (1994), and *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum* (1997; posthumous).

Furthermore, Oruka held several positions in various societies, including being the founder-president of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK), the founder-director of the International Institute of Environmental Studies (IIES), a member of the Kenya National Academy of Sciences (KNAS), the secretary-general of African Futures Studies Association (AFSA), the secretary-general of the Afro-Asian Philosophical Association (AAPA), vice-president of the Inter-African Council of Philosophy (IACP), a member of the Steering committee of both the *Federation Internationale des Societies de philosophie* (FISP) and World Futures Studies Federation (Oruka 1990b).

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