Odera Oruka's Four Trends in African Philosophy and their Implications for Education in Africa

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Abstract

The late Kenyan philosopher, Henry Odera Oruka, identified six schools of thought on what African philosophy is or could be, namely, ethno-philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, professional philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy, and artistic or literary philosophy. The first four are the generally well known and well explained schools of African philosophy. In this article, we seek to reflect on the implications of the four trends on education in Africa. This enterprise is informed by the conviction that philosophy of education, while it deals with some issues that are peculiar to education, can benefit immensely from other philosophical discourses. Consequently, African philosophy of education can derive substantial benefit from interaction with debates on African philosophy.

Key words

Trends in African philosophy, philosophy of education, Henry Odera Oruka

Introduction

In response to the debate on the existence of African philosophy, the late Kenyan philosopher, H. Odera Oruka, identified six approaches to the answer as to what African philosophy is or could be, namely, ethno-philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, professional philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy, and artistic or literary philosophy (Oruka 1998, 101). These approaches have been invariably referred to as *trends* in African philosophy (Oruka 1997, 182), *schools* of African Thought /Philosophy (Oruka 1987, 55), or *currents* in African philosophy (Outlaw 1987, 24). However, Oruka clearly outlined only the first four of these approaches.

While philosophy of education has its own peculiar themes, it borrows from other discourses in philosophy. Besides, given the similarities in philosophical status between African Philosophy generally and African Philosophy of Education, there is ample justification for using Oruka's

reflections on the four trends in African philosophy to shed light on education in Africa. This becomes even more apparent when one considers that the arguments that have been profferred against the existence of African Philosophy have also been deployed to deny the existence of African indigenous education (Ocitti 1994; Bodunrin 1984; Hountondji 1983). As such, the philosophical responses advanced in the area of African philosophy generally can be of great benefit to philosophers involved in reflections on modern and indigenous African education. In particular, reflections on the four trends in African Philosophy that Oruka clearly outlines can be of great value to those philosophers who have been contemplating the philosophical status of African philosophy of education (Kai and Penny 2009).

Consequently, in this paper, we reflect on the relevance to education in Africa of the four trends in African philosophy clearly outlined by Oruka. This undertaking is pertinent in the light of the dearth of literature on African philosophy of education. We also take cognisance of the fact that "For Odera Oruka ... philosophy is not a science in the ivory tower, but has to contribute to the betterment of the life of the people - it has to be practical. Philosophers have to deploy the results of their thinking to the well-being of their communities" (Graness 2012, 2). If Dewey's contention that philosophy is "the generalized theory of education" (Dewey 1944, 331) is valid, there is no reason to doubt the value of the proposed enterprise.

The paper presents an exposition of each of the four trends in African philosophy, followed immediately by a discussion of its implications to African philosophy of education. The four trends in the order in which they are discussed here are ethno-philosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist/ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy. Nevertheless, these trends should be regarded not as distinct from one another, but rather as a continuum (Oruka 1987). The paper refrains from giving a detailed exposition of the criticisms against each trend, as this has been done in numerous publications including Bodunrin (1991), Hountondji (1996), Oruka (1991), Owomoyela (1991) and Serequeberhan (1991).

Ethno-philosophy

According to Ochieng-Odhiambo and Iteyo (2012), the term ethno-philosophy within the realm of African philosophy was first used by Kwame Nkrumah. However, Serequeberhan (1991) contends that as a label for a particular brand of African philosophy, the word ethno-philosophy was coined by Paulin Hountondji who viewed it as a hybrid of ethnology and philosophy, after which it was adopted by Oruka (1987, 56) to describe the views of those scholars who, following the tradition of Placide Tempels, "positively rely on the ethnographical findings in their conception or definition of African Philosophy". Bodunrin (1984, 1) explains that ethno-philosophy refers to the works of anthropologists, sociologists and ethnographers who interpret the "collective world views of African peoples, their myths and folk wisdom" as constitutive of African philosophy. On his part, Serequeberhan (1991, 17) explains ethno-philosophy as characterised by the conviction that the starting point of African philosophy is the "mythical religious conception, world views and ritual practices" lived by the African people. Consequently, it is a study of ethnic Africans and their way of life with a view to arriving at an understanding of how they make sense of the reality that they experience.

However, Oruka (1987) explains that those belonging to this school need not themselves be ethnographers or anthropologists, but only to hold the view that ethnographical data provides the distinction between African Philosophy and Western Philosophy. Oruka (cited in Outlaw 1987, 24) further defines ethno-philosophy as "works or books which 'purport' to describe a world outlook or thought system of a particular African community or the whole of Africa". Ethno-philosophers therefore attempt to examine the thought of particular African communities, with a view to finding what can be regarded as philosophical in it. Oruka (1991, 52) refers to the resultant philosophy as *culture philosophy*. Because the first proponents of ethno-philosophy did not regard African philosophy as "a body of logically argued thoughts of individuals" (Bodunrin 1984, 1) but as a body of communal thought whose uniqueness lies in its emotional appeal, Oruka further described ethno-philosophy as "philosophy only in the 'debased' sense of the term" (Oruka 1987, 49).

Nevertheless, Mudimbe (quoted in Outlaw 1987, 25) does not use the term ethno-philosophy in a pejorative sense, but follows its etymological sense when he defines it as "works arising from

the need to express and to render faithfully the unity and the coherence of traditional philosophies". Indeed, among ethno-philosophers are those who, to use Outlaw's words, sought to "replace the caricature of the invented African with an image reconstructed (and rehabilitated) through the extension of the denotative range of the privileged category of 'rational animal' to 'traditional' Africans" (Outlaw 1987, 27).

Ethno-philosophy had its origins in the view that Africans were "fundamentally distinct and different from Western societies" (Oruka 1987, 58). While Africans were said to be pre-scientific and to lack critical, abstract and independent thought as well as logic as it was understood by the Western world, the West was said to be scientific, critical, abstract and independent as well as being objective. While African thought was presented as communal and involving adherence to perennial wisdom from the past, the West was said to rely on postulations and the use of inferences deductively established. Africans were presented as intuitive and conforming to the values of the community. Rationality, the attribute which sets apart human beings from lesser animals, was said to be absent from reified Africans (Oruka 1987).

Nevertheless, Africans showed signs of having a mind, which is a prerequisite to rationality, and could be credited with the ability to ratiocinate. This gave birth to ethno-philosophy, which studies African folklore, tales, myths, proverbs, religious beliefs and practices, and African culture in general. Bodunrin (1984, 10), in support of this approach, maintains that these are worthy of a philosopher's attention, and points to the existence of "respectable and in many ways complex, and in some sense rational and logical conceptual analysis in Africa". He further contends that belief systems are rational if one understands why believers hold them and logical if one understands the premises on which they are based.

What is the implication of ethno-philosophy to education in Africa? It has long been argued by Western scholars that Africans lacked culture, history and all those other refinements that distinguish human beings from other animals. A corollary to this was the allegation that Africans lacked education, as was argued by Barker (quoted in Ocitti 1994, 14). Myths about the inferiority of the African intellect, allegedly manifested by the absence of schools and writing,

were formulated and propagated by missionaries and colonial settlers (Mungazi 1982). A study of ethno-philosophy by philosophers of education helps them to grasp the extent of the denigration of the African, and makes them aware that such arguments were not confined to African indigenous education. The awareness thus created also leads to the realisation that there is no need to re-invent the wheel in responding to such challenges. African philosophers of education can learn from responses given by African philosophers, while also recognising that the reality of ethno-philosophy cannot be denied. There is merit in studying African communities, for this provides access to their values, beliefs and knowledge systems that are crucial to education in Africa. Indeed, Venter (2004) argues that ethno-philosophers view truth as being located within traditional African world-views. This underscores the need for such studies to be critical of whatever element of African culture they are discussing for this truth to be revealed, understood and utilised in addressing challenges in education in Africa.

Philosophic Sagacity

Oruka states that "Sage philosophy started as a reaction to a position which Europeans had adopted about Africa, that Africans are not capable of philosophy" (quoted in Presbey 1998, 1). Oruka (1997, 181) quotes a European who said to Oginga Odinga, "Look here, Odinga, your head was not created to think, but to take orders." Consequently, Oruka indicates that one of the goals of sage philosophy was to repudiate beliefs of this nature. He also aimed to find out whether or not "there was anything that Africans could contribute to philosophy that is authentically African" (Oruka 1997, 183).

According to Bodunrin (1984, 2), philosophic sagacity "implicitly rejects the holistic approach to African philosophy" that characterises ethno-philosophy. Philosophic sagacity does not encourage looking at the general worldviews, customs, folktales and beliefs of a people. Instead, it is "that philosophy that is derived from the thinking or the thought of wise persons" (Oruka 1997, 181) reputed for "exceptional wisdom" (Azenabor 2009, 73). Azenabor (2009, 73) further defines sage philosophy as "a reflective evaluation of thought by an individual African elder who is a repository of wisdom, knowledge and rigorous critical thinking". Philosophers in this school recommend the identification of men and women in African communities known for their wisdom and independent thinking, that is, those who possess more than mere knowledge of

the historical experiences and cardinal beliefs and values of their communities. The views of such individuals who critically engage their existential situations are then recorded, and these constitute the philosophies of these wise individuals. They are the sages, for they reflect on the communal set up, popular wisdom and their own experiences (Oruka 1999, 61). The thrust of this school is to "help substantiate or invalidate the claim that traditional African people were innocent of logical and critical thinking" (Oruka, quoted in Azenabor 2009, 73).

After pointing out that for Bodunrin African philosophy must be scientific, that is, it must be systematic and/or written, Oruka (1997, 184) asserts that "literacy need not be a necessary condition for thinking", that is, for philosophical reflection and exposition. He explains that in Africa there were independent thinkers who lived by what reason dictated, and capable of critical and dialectical inquiry, despite the fact that they could not read or write. They therefore expounded genuine African philosophy. These were thinkers who were original in their investigations. Their views can now be committed to writing through engagement with professional philosophers.

According to Bodunrin (1986), there are two ways of approaching philosophic sagacity. *First*, the professional philosopher can visit the rural areas and identify people reputed for their wisdom and knowledge of African culture. He or she enters into dialogue with these sage philosophers on particular concepts. For example, a professional philosopher might engage such sage philosophers in a dialogue on the Yoruba concept of a person, while tape recording their conversations. From the various dialogues, he or she picks up essential similarities and compiles the philosophy of the group on the issue. While the professional philosopher is not to impose his or her views on the interviewees, he or she may point out inconsistencies during the conversations. Follow-up visits may be conducted to authenticate his or her findings. However, further reflection on this approach as explained in this paragraph shows that Bodunrin is confusing ethno-philosophy with philosophic sagacity, as what the professional philosopher ends up with is a collective conception of the object of inquiry.

For Bodunrin, the *second* approach is that used by Odera Oruka and his team. They recorded the philosophy of individual Kenyan sages who were uninfluenced by modern education. Oruka and

his team were not recording the "common thought of the Kenyan Luo tribe" but ideas of particular individual philosophers (Bodunrin 1984, 9). What informed Oruka and his team was the desire "to find out the critical thinking of some native Kenyans, thereby establishing that there are native Africans capable of doing rigorous philosophy" (Bodunrin 1984, 9). This was because Oruka advocated a situation where professional philosophers "extract the philosophical wisdom embodied in these sages" (Serequeberhan 1991, 19).

In philosophic sagacity, the professional philosopher is helping the sage philosophers to "give birth" to philosophical ideas already in them. Although it could be argued that the product is a result of joint effort by the sage philosopher and the professional philosopher, Bodunrin (1984, 9) proposes that since the two are "doing their own thing", there is no reason to deny that this is a philosophy: the two philosophers are collaborating in the creative act. This indicates that indigenous Africans uninfluenced by western education can, in fact, philosophise.

From the standpoint of philosophic sagacity, it is reasonable to assert that Indigenous African education, like indigenous African Philosophy, has been in existence from time immemorial: the absence of writing is not an indication of the absence of education. The challenge then is to investigate the philosophies of indigenous education through engaging sage philosophers. There is need to identify individual Africans, both young and old, in rural and urban communities, who are repositories of knowledge and who critically engage their experiences. These could be poets, herbalists, medicine men/women, musicians, historians or priests.

Community based research into what ought to inform African education systems today is crucial given the widespread belief that the indigenous education systems that still exist in many African communities have nothing to contribute to contemporary education curricula (Nziramasanga 1999, 14). The aim would be to enrich the values that inform contemporary curricula by unmasking and developing individual indigenous philosophies of education. Indeed, interrogating sage philosophy of education is in line with the endeavour to harness indigenous knowledge systems in an effort to make curricula respond to the needs of the African people, especially if we share Ochieng-Odhiambo and Iteyo's view that sage philosophy "discards the undesirable elements of ethno-philosophy and professional philosophy while retaining desirable

ones, namely, the Africanness in ethno-philosophy and the objectivity in professional philosophy" (Ochieng-Odhiambo and Iteyo 2012, 2).

Nationalist/ Ideological Philosophy

Nationalist/ Ideological philosophy emanates from the ideologies of national liberation movements. The leaders of these liberation movements expounded their ideas in pamphlets, political programmes, manifestos and other writings. These can be philosophically engaged to produce a political philosophy or political philosophies (Serequeberhan 1991, 20).

This is the type of philosophy that emanates from the works of political thinkers who have also come up with philosophies of education for their countries. Such political thinkers include Nkrumah (1978) who came up with his ideology of decolonisation in *Consciencism*, Nyerere (1967) who advocated the concepts of *Ujamaa* ("familihood"), education for self-reliance, education for liberation and lifelong education, and Leopold Sedar Sengor who developed the philosophy of negritude in which he valorised "certain distinctive and innate characteristics, values and aesthetics" among Africans (cited in Duckworth 2010, 1). Nationalist/ideological philosophy basically tries to develop a new political theory based on traditional African familyhood. It advocates mental liberation and a return to African humanism. It arose out of the conviction that political independence must be accompanied by "a true mental liberation" (Bodunrin 1991, 64). The conviction that informs this philosophy is that the European model and ideologies have failed in Africa. An awareness that they were imitating Europeans compelled these African political thinkers to begin to reflect upon the traditional social order and to search for salvation in pre-colonial experiences in establishing authenticity. Related to the question of authenticity was concern with the issue of African identity.

In reflecting upon this school of African philosophy, Bodunrin (1986, 7) notes that the past cannot be recast as it used to be. He proceeds to argue that Nkrumah seems to have realised this when he advocated "a new African socialism" that would consider the existential conditions of the Africans. Nkrumah (1978) proposes that the reconstruction of a new social order has to take

into consideration the African past, Christianity and Islam, with the point of departure being the traditional way of life.

Africans, after imitating Europeans and being disillusioned, sought to find an alternative which would restore their dignity and identity as a people. This alternative had to be authentic and rooted in African experience. Nationalist ideological philosophers therefore advocated going back to their roots, their traditional past to seek salvation and develop the way forward (Nkrumah 1978; Nyerere 1967).

The ideas of some of the nationalist/ideological philosophers had far reaching consequences for education. This was due to the fact that some of these individuals were political leaders who also came up with educational programmes for their countries. An outstanding example of such a leader was Julius K. Nyerere, who came up with the Arusha Declaration in which he set forth his educational ideas of self-reliance and the socialist ideology on which it was based (Nyerere 1968). Philosophers of education in Africa can interrogate the views of these leaders in an attempt to understand the educational theories that informed them and evaluate the limitations of these ideas with a view to proposing the direction for education in the continent. This is very important, given the need for education that fuses theory with practice.

There is also need to use indigenous African experiences to promote family values given the continued fragmentation of communities due to war and intolerance. The experience of genocide in Rwanda, religious intolerance in the Central African Republic, Xenophobia in South Africa, as well as continued fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Somalia, are all evidence of communities unable to live peacefully with one another. Philosophers of education can use nationalist/ideological philosophy to foster solidarity by promoting the awareness of the common identity of the African people. Furthermore, philosophers of education need to engage the philosophies of *Hunhu/Ubuntu*, Negritude, Consciencism, Scientific Socialism, and Humanism, all of which were enunciated by some of the African leaders, and have had an impact on the educational systems in postcolonial Africa, and therefore need to be interrogated if adequate reforms in education are to be effected.

Professional Philosophy

Hountondji (1996, p.viii) describes professional philosophy as "a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by the authors themselves". This school consists of that philosophy expounded by western-trained African philosophers such as Oruka (1987), Bodunrin (1986), Wiredu (1980), Hountondji (1996) and many others involved in philosophical discussion in and/or on Africa. Some of these African philosophers were of the conviction that African philosophy did not yet exist (Serequeberhan 1991, 21), or at least that it was just beginning to exist in their own discourses (Gyekye 1987, 8). For them philosophy is the handmaid of science and modernization. They assert that philosophy, whether in Africa or the North, is different from religion, mythology and mysticism. On the one hand, central to philosophy is the use of reason in critical thinking; on the other, religion, mythology and mysticism rely on faith. Those who subscribe to the professional philosophy school insist that while the North has been for long involved with science and philosophy, the two fields of inquiry are not preserves of the North (Serequeberhan 1991; Hountondji 1996).

Thus those who belong to the professional philosophy school reject the particularistic approach of ethno-philosophy and take a Universalist view of philosophy instead: they argue that philosophy must have the same meaning everywhere, so that what should differ are the problems it interrogates, and, in some cases, the methods of dealing with these problems. The methods can be determined by cultural biases and the existential situation in the society in which the philosopher operates (Hountondji 1996; Wiredu 1980; Bodunrin 1986). Thus according to adherents of the professional philosophy school, African and European philosophies are understandably different by virtue of the varying cultures and environments from which they evolve. However, the difference does not lie in the use of reason. Indeed, Oruka points out that "reason is a universal human trait" (Oruka 1986, 66). Hence members of this school argue that philosophy is a conceptual, self-critical discourse that uses logic. In addition, philosophy is preserved through writing: there are written philosophical works that the West can point to as their philosophy (Wright 1986). The implication of this assertion is that since there were no written texts that Africans could point to as their philosophy, African philosophy could not be said to exist prior to the advent of colonialism.

Oruka (1986, 66) argues that philosophy can be understood in two senses:

1. Philosophy as a person's or a people's general unexamined outlook on life. This all societies have by virtue of the fact of being human [This is philosophy at the first order level];
2. Philosophy as a critical evaluation of this outlook and a free reflection on ideas and concepts as the mirrors of reality.

Oruka (1986) proceeds to argue that African philosophy should not be restricted to the first order level. Most, if not all, professional African philosophers agree that African philosophy is more than folk world views, because it entails a critical reflection on issues.

From the outlook of the professional philosophy school, we can infer that African Philosophy of Education must be concerned with issues that are pertinent to African realities, and adopt some of the methods that African philosophers use in the exploration of "the phenomenon called education" (Venter 2004, 155). This interrogation ought to be undertaken with the tools that philosophy employs in its scrutiny of other issues, that is, systematic, logical, critical, consistent thinking (Venter 2004, 155). African philosophers of education need to critically engage questions about the aims of education in Africa, as well as the nature of the curricula and methodologies that facilitate learning in African educational institutions. In sum, African philosophers of education ought to interrogate educational theory and practice with a view to offering prescriptions that render them responsive to the contemporary needs of the continent.

Furthermore, African philosophers of education need to reflect on the perennial question of relevance in African education, that is, the need to make education Afro-centred. They must critically engage current educational policies as well as the processes of decision-making in education in terms of the qualities of character and life skills that the said policies and decisions seek to develop in the learners. They also have to interrogate ways in which education can address questions of African identity and the place of the individual in society. Indeed, on the role of African philosophy, Venter (2004, 154) quotes Letseka who contends that "It should

provide rational tools for critical reflections on personal wellbeing or human flourishing, on communal ethics and how these ought to impact on human conduct." In other words, there is need to guard against the pursuit of universality at the expense of the particularity of the African experiences.

Informed by Afrocentricity, there is need for African philosophers of education to consider ways of placing students at the centre of their own cultures and historical milieu. The linchpin then becomes an exploration of pedagogical approaches that seek to liberate the learner to enable him/her to appreciate his/her own culture and those of others. This will involve the development of dispositions to examine reality from an African perspective, that is, to develop an Afrocentric orientation to data (Asante 2009, 2).

Conclusion

Having discussed the relevance to education of the four trends in African philosophy initially identified by Odera Oruka, it is important to acknowledge that there are many other trends in African philosophy that are being or will be identified. These will naturally have a bearing on educational issues. Thus while African philosophers of education engage philosophical issues that arise within the realm of education, it is essential for them to remain alert to other areas of African philosophy.

Indeed, Mkabela and Luthuli (quoted in Venter 2004, 155) had this to say about the task of African Philosophy of Education:

- It should be an activity directed at the "theoretical analysis of educational issues, matters and ideas of practical concern to education;
- It should deal with the issue of the imposition of Western values on African culture;
- It has to delve into the roots of African traditional thought and its influence on educational issues;
- It should attempt to restore the true worth of the essential principles behind the African way of thinking;

- It should deal with modes of thinking that regard Africans as lesser human beings - Africans should start formulating a new history of themselves;

- It should encourage critical thinking;

- It should investigate theoretical foundations of African moral thinking;

- It should concern itself with critical reflection on educational issues that arise in contemporary Africa.

If this is the mandate of African Philosophy of Education, it would appear that no one school of African philosophy would be up to the task. We therefore suggest an eclectic approach in which all trends in African philosophy have a role to play in responding to the challenge of constructing an authentic African philosophy of education.

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