

# THE ROLE OF SAGACITY IN RESOLVING CONFLICTS PEACEFULLY

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Sage Philosophy is one of the important trends in contemporary African philosophy. The search for an alternative to the acrimonious debates between ethnophilosophy and the so-called professional philosophy must have been one of the factors that encouraged H. Odera Oruka to venture into this area of African thought. Anthony Oseghare sees sage philosophy not only as an alternative, but also as a new orientation in African philosophy in the making.

He wrote,

A sage may be limited only to the ability to recount the folk, communal ideas of his people in which case he is a folk sage. On the other hand, it was found that there are also the select few sages able to transcend the communal ideas of their respective people in order to espouse a personal, critical philosophy. These are appropriately described as philosophic sages. Since this is something novel, it must be regarded as philosophy in the making as in deed the whole of African philosophy when “philosophy” is taken in the formalized academic sense. I suggest, therefore, that Sage Philosophy is the cornerstone of this new orientation.<sup>1</sup>

Oruka believed that “reason and reflection are not monopolies or unique traits of any one given race: they are human qualities.”<sup>2</sup> The assertion that there is no African

philosophy ultimately leads to the denial of reason to the African and tries to present the African in the cover of magic and extra-rational traditionalism.

It is this attempt to see the African, his culture, ways of life and the like as part and parcel of human civilization which more or less partake in all human activities and endeavors including that of reason, that led Oruka to the work he did among the Kenyan sages. Explaining this he writes, “we came up with the list and texts of sages whose thought and practice were critical and reflective. It is the thought of such sages that I have called Sage Philosophy.”<sup>3</sup> He did his research among the Kenyan sages and came up with findings that showed that some of these sages were people with more or less considered critical and independent ideas on what are important aspects of human life and activity. Their ideas on the meaning of existence, God, the good, and so on, are in many cases original and important philosophical discourses on a whole range of issues concerning the sages’ immediate surroundings. In addition, these thoughts constitute the raw data for philosophical analysis.

Now, what is sagacity? Sagacity basically is wisdom, understood in a wide sense to be the ideas of those known to be wise by members of their communities. Sagacity could also mean the ensemble of fundamental knowledge and understanding that constitutes the habits,

customs and experiences of a people. It is this phenomenon which basically is wisdom that on the one hand has a practical significance in social life and on the other could serve as a point of departure in philosophical deliberations. As F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo said, "philosophic sagacity contends that among the various African communities exist individuals who, despite the fact that they have not had the benefit of studying Western philosophy, are nevertheless critical independent thinkers."<sup>4</sup>

Oruka distinguishes between two types of sagacity. These are sagacity as popular wisdom and sagacity as didactic wisdom. He wrote,

[sagacity as popular wisdom] consists of maxims, aphorisms, and wise sayings associated with no particular persons, yet they are popularly known and generally employed in the oral literature of the community. [Sagacity as didactic wisdom] is an expounded and well-reasoned thought of some individuals in a given culture. Such individuals may be famous in their community but they may also be very much unknown to the community since wise persons do not always go about selling their wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

Oruka takes as philosophic sages those people who have expounded and reasoned-out thoughts on important aspects of human life. While the first type of sagacity requires that one can explain maxims of the community, philosophic sagacity requires that one is critical of the popular sayings, and recommends that ideas that have been inherited from previous generations as absolute truths be evaluated in the light of reason before they are accepted.

It is a critical reflection on the first order (culture philosophy)... it is a critical rebellion against the first order conformity and anachronism. While the first order glorifies the communal conformity, philosophic sagacity is skeptical of communal consensus, and it employs reason to assess it. While the first order is purely absolutist and ideological the second order is generally open-minded and rationalistic. Its truths are given as tentative and ratiocinative, not as God-sent messages.<sup>6</sup>

A cursory glance at the interviews of Oruka with the sages shows that there were sages who for instance said that God is a postulation by man as the idea of goodness or virtue. There were also sages who understood God as the white man's witchcraft. I do not think that there is a point in arguing that their ideas about God were correct or not. The important thing is that they had the curiosity and courage to make investigation into the idea of God, and the result is that they were able to understand the object of their thought in the light of reason. In effect it means they wondered about the nature of God, human life, etc. Does not philosophy begin in this act of wondering? It is this act of wondering and seeking an answer to the puzzle that draws the demarcation line between those who accept the maxims as opposed to those who would like to see them and the whole gamut of inherited knowledge and experiences rationally and critically. In the way they try to handle certain issues which are of philosophical significance and in the solutions that they provide regarding these issues, the philosophic sages have demonstrated that their endeavors could be considered philosophical.

I will now suggest that Sage Philosophy can and should play a role in solving many

of Africa's crises. As we know Africa today faces grave problems of development. The development effort is hindered by a whole range of factors like Africa's place in the world economic system, the inability and unwillingness of the ruling elite to handle the development effort properly and a number of conflicts that revolve around these factors. The African people are now faced with the daunting task of redirecting all their efforts towards development. The grave problems of poverty, environmental degradation, increase in population and the like could only be properly tackled if the African people are in a position to resolve conflicts that are raging through the continent. This is important because it is the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully that will enable Africans to put all their efforts at the disposal of the development endeavor.

In many African countries today there are class, ethnic, gender, religious, and other conflicts. Generally speaking whatever manifestations they may have, the conflicts boil down to the issue of sharing wealth and power. Conflict resolution, therefore, requires working out a mechanism that, on the one hand, enables resolving the existent conflicts, and on the other, finds ways for members of society to find and grapple with the source(s) of conflict. Sages mostly have a basic understanding of the individual in society, social life and the "natural order" at large. Their understanding of conflict and its resolution can be attributed to the manner in which social life is understood.

What is the role of sagacity in resolving conflicts? Firstly, the issue of democracy and the effort at democratization seem to be the main agenda in many African countries. The democratization process has been hindered by two main problems. First, there is the lack of political will by

the African ruling elite. They are not ready to share power and wealth. They are supposed to be at the forefront of this process but they are becoming a hindrance to its progress. Secondly, how the democratization process will work in the midst of our cultures is not clearly worked out. I do not want to argue that, because Africa had a different political culture, tradition, history, etc., democracy will not work in Africa. But at the same time in order to take deep root in Africa it is necessary that democracy tries to work in harmony with the previously established tradition and culture.

For the sages, corruption designates taking a departure from the normal, natural course of things. Due to their basic understanding of social life sages are committed to the betterment of society. Indeed something largely missing among academic philosophers, but a guiding principle of sagacity is the commitment that they have to establish a good society. Their purpose is more practical than academic. It can, therefore, be argued that their understanding of social life, the good will and commitment to a better society will not give a place to corrupt rulers.

Regarding the second point, explaining how decisions were made in the court of a chief in early 20th Century South Africa, Mandela said,

The meetings would continue until some kind of consensus is reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all. Unanimity, however, might be an agreement to disagree, to wait for a more propitious time to propose a solution. Democracy meant all men were to be heard, and a decision was taken together as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority.<sup>7</sup>

There are a number of similar statements by African leaders like Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, and others. Although in the case of leaders like Kaunda, the notion of consensus was used to justify the one party system, it nevertheless underlines an important aspect of African political life which has to be taken seriously if current attempts at democratization have to bear fruits. Kaunda said, "In our original societies we operated by consensus. An issue was talked out in solemn conclave until such time as agreement could be achieved."<sup>8</sup> Nyerere said, "In African societies the traditional method of conducting affairs is by free discussion... the elders sit under big trees, and talk until they agree."<sup>9</sup>

We have to see that these points suggest that the mechanism of decision making takes care of resolving conflicts by not only enabling everyone to express his thoughts but also by enabling a decision that will more or less accommodate the ideas of everybody. Of course in the situation of today some of these things may not only be difficult but also impossible to implement. But I think it would be wise if an attempt is made to enable a culture that has deep roots in Africa to play a role. If this is done probably our attempts to resolve some of the conflicts could possibly be fruitful.

Sagacity had its basis in a milieu where the *modus operandi*, particularly in political affairs was consensus. Just as we replaced the indigenous sagacious reasoning with other forms of thought, we also replaced the idea of consensus with the idea of a majority rule, a dictatorship, etc. In trying to give a role to sagacity we must also give a role to consensus without of course exaggerating its contribution.

Moreover if we go deeper into the wisdom of the sages, in addition to grasping the

whole socio-cultural processes we can also get the opportunity to resolve some of the conflicts that threaten our societies. To my knowledge the whole extent of the findings of Oruka with the Kenyan sages is not yet known. But if we simply look at the materials that have been published up to now and the practical implications of some of these ideas, we can see the wealth of useful knowledge contained in sagacity.

Oruka's testimony concerning the burial of Silvano Melea Otieno is an example. Given the circumstances what the court did was necessary - namely enabling to resolve a problem on the basis of an indigenous wisdom because the decision reached on the basis of a modern system of laws was not acceptable to the community and the immediate relatives of the deceased person. This is only a very limited aspect of African life in which indigenous wisdom is used to resolve a conflict. It would be naive to assume that such wisdom is unable to resolve some of Africa's pressing problems. There is no solution to a problem that can be prescribed a priori. What the modern way of life, culture, system of laws, etc., present as solutions to diverse social, political and economic problems are only alternatives and should not be seen as being the solutions alone. Without denying the complexity of the issue and with the realization that it may not be acceptable to persons representing other views, I would suggest that it can be accepted as an alternative settlement. In such situations it may not be possible to make a decision or judgement that may be acceptable to everybody. That makes this decision an alternatively better decision.

A good example of how sages could be useful to their communities is given by Oruka himself where he underlines the role of sagacity in development. People with new knowledge who want to put their knowledge to use must take note of the

culture and psychology of the people that they want to serve if their efforts have to bring about meaningful changes. This is equally important in all realms of socio-economic life. An efficient and successful function among one's people presupposes that one is knowledgeable of the culture of the people that one wants to serve. As Oruka wrote, "Among the people, sages, if known are opinion leaders. People frequently consult them. Sages are in many ways experts in the nature and problems of the people. One effective way to understand a people and their culture is to go through their sages."<sup>10</sup>

In issues that involve the relations of the people with one another, with nature, etc., sages are the ones who are able to deliver ideas that are based on long experience in life and a critical and fairly rational reflection. Their ideas assume an established harmony between man and nature and also between man and man. The origin or reason of the harmony could be traced to a god that regulates everything in a regular manner or it may even be understood as a mere law of nature. This assumption is important because it paves the way for an orderly and peaceful social life and moreover implies some kind of harmony between man and nature. An outlook based on such an assumption does not have a place for hatred and conflict or its potential for resolving conflicts is considerable.

The problem, however, is that the sages' expertise is often neglected. This happens because, firstly, "wise persons do not always go about selling their wisdom." And secondly, the sages:

...are potentially and contemporarily in clash with the die-hard adherents of the prevailing common beliefs. Such sages are also capable of conceiving and rationally

recommending ideas offering alternatives to the commonly accepted opinions and practices. They transcend the communal wisdom. They are lucky if the people recognize this special gift in them. If so, they are treated with special respect and their suggestions peacefully and positively reform the people. Should the people fail to recognize their gift, then their safety in the community would demand that they remain silent. Socrates is a good example of the unrecognized sage who failed to keep silence. Thus he came to the expected, logically predictable fate.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, it must not be forgotten that most of us who go through modern education are highly infatuated with the so-called Western and modern way of life. Our infatuation at times becomes so exaggerated that we seem to attach no value to the indigenous culture and knowledge. Western education cultivates this very passionately. Instead of trying to find out what could be of value in certain situations, we think that it is the indigenous culture and ways of thinking that cause the problem and condemn them as backward trying to replace them by the Western ones. This simply indicates to what extent the Western system has succeeded in brainwashing the educated of the Third World countries. Although to be educated means the appropriation of new knowledge it must, however, be a critical appropriation that does not take to self-denial.

Here we must always bear in mind the merits of the sages and see what essentially distinguishes them from philosophers, as we know them in the academic world, because,

In a strict sense, a sage has at least two abilities, insight and ethical inspiration. So a sage is wise, he has

insight but he employs this for the ethical betterment of his/her community. A philosopher may be a sage and vice versa. But many philosophers do lack the ethical commitment and inspiration found in a sage. A sage proper, is usually the friend of truth and wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

It is the idea of being the friend of truth that makes sage philosophy an important phenomenon in African philosophy. It is not only curiosity and indifference with which they deal with the concepts but also the partisanship with which they want to use this knowledge for the betterment of society that is important. As G. Presbey says, "the sages are committed to society's betterment. By challenging individuals to improve themselves morally they hope to improve society."<sup>13</sup> Challenging individuals to improve society is a broad thing. It ranges from handling development issues, through tackling a number of social, economic and other problems, and resolving conflicts. If the ideas that are grown on local experience and reflection can solve some of the problems, is there a convincing reason to stick to a modern system of laws and the like in all spheres of life?

I would like to describe what I know from experience concerning reconciliation by elders. Reconciliation by elders plays an important role in Ethiopia, where personal conflicts, conflicts between members of a family, conflicts over property and property rights, even cases of homicide, conflicts between members of different communities and others are often resolved by mediation of elders in the community. Elders are selected carefully on the basis of their knowledge, wisdom and non-partisanship to the conflicting parties. The notion of reconciliation by elders presents itself as an alternative at times to the official legal system. Conflicts of various categories are

resolved by elders even at the recommendation of authorities in the judiciary. Moreover, reconciliation bases itself on the idea that even if two persons or parties enter into a conflict it is possible to overcome it "for the sake of God" or "in the name of God" as the elders usually say, and reconcile the conflicting parties.

What the elders do in the reconciliation process is to try to find out the truth of the matter by talking to the parties to the conflict in order to render justice. In doing so they enable the offender to request for forgiveness and help the offended also to come to terms with the deed and thereby forgive for the sake of God. There are cases where the offence may be compensated for in money or something similar. But actually the important thing in this sort of reconciliation is the assumption, that it is almost always possible to reconcile conflicting parties. This bases itself on the understanding that peaceful life is natural and willed both by God and human beings. This puts the conflicting parties also in a situation where they can not refuse to reconcile since refusal would imply that those who refuse are against the natural course of events and eventually the will of God. The very idea of reconciliation sets a sort of a hierarchy where God comes on top and the elders are seen as his mouthpieces. Their mediation efforts must be acceptable to the conflicting parties, or the party that refuses reconciliation faces a number of sanctions by the community. This is supported by a long established tradition that says disobedience to the words of the elders is tantamount to disobedience to the will of God. In their efforts, the elders use their experiences in life, their knowledge of the culture of the people and wisdom. They are those whom the members of the community recognize as wise that are selected in most cases.

This and the number of points emphasized in the paper above are examples of the role

of traditional wisdom in general and sagacity in particular. This constitutes one of the points where African philosophy must involve itself considerably, if among other things it wants to address the issue of relevance. By dealing with problems that are continuously haunting Africans (conflicts of different sorts) and attempting to enable an understanding that may help in overcoming the problems, African philosophy could be up to its challenges. Hence this must be followed from the point of view of saving this wisdom and from its practical use or significance.

This requires from us that we devote an important part of our time and resources to the further study of sagacity. The way this could be done may vary. We could go to the sages that are known to the community and try to learn from them by using the method used by O. Oruka. We could also learn from the way they try to handle issues, conflicts and other problems in their communities. Moreover this further study could also include other ways that the communities handle their problems and issues. As far as resolving conflicts is concerned, tales, proverbs, songs, etc. constitute a point of departure from which we could ultimately draw some lessons.

It is reasonable to assume that wise persons, as a result of their knowledge and their role in the community are the most appropriate to deliver the ideas that could render possible a peaceful life in the community. As G. Presbey says,

...a sage is rooted in a location and has connections to the community. The rural African sage, in contrast to the contemporary academic philosopher ...is in a context more closely related to Socrates' context in ancient Athens. In Africa, the community is more stable; most people are there for life. The sage

knows several generations of the same family. The community members know him or her for many years. This closeness in living together and knowing each other generates a philosophy of particular interest in the community as a whole. Philosophy in this context is not marginalized to the ivory tower.<sup>14</sup>

In view of the vastness of Africa and the diversity of its cultures it may not be possible to point out which specific ideas are appropriate in which situations. I don't think that this is appropriate either. Basically what we have to accept in principle is that there are a number of valuable ideas in the cultures and philosophies of life that could be factors of cohesion by avoiding conflicts. Their utility depends on how we try to use them in specific situations. As a result of changes in the last many years some of these ideas have been eroded. Indeed there are communities that are poised at the junction between two worlds as a result of this and the utility of the ideas in such communities may be very difficult.

Owing to the introduction of these new ideas the previous ones have been uprooted; the new ones also could not take deep roots. There seems to be an approach upheld by a majority of politicians, administrators, etc., that new ideas are the most useful. I think that such an approach is not helpful in conducting either daily affairs or resolving conflicts. What I mean by this is that there is a tendency even in many parts of rural Africa that only the "modern ideas" of law, justice, democracy, etc., are useful and right. Here the politicians, administrators and so on take the rural communities not as active participants of a process but as passive recipients of new ideas, new ideas which sometimes make little or no sense in the communities involved. Hence our

endeavors to bring about change resolve conflicts, and the like must first of all make their points of departure the communities that we want to serve. Those who want to involve as initiators of change should perhaps first of all try to know what the communities want instead of proceeding with the ideas that are formulated in places that are a bit away from these communities and often times hardly address what these people want. If we know what the people want and understand the way they want to go about it, then it can be imagined that it may be easier to work out a solution with the agreement of (both) all.

What Africa and the Africans need now above everything else is to resolve conflicts through reconciliation. We need a process that could enable us to reconcile with ourselves, with each other, with our own ideas and values at large. The kind of fratricide that we observe today - a phenomenon that is passionately followed by the Western media - in many parts of Africa may be explained by the colonial legacy and the subsequent developments that did little or nothing to redress the injustices of the past. Is it not, however, high time that the new generation of Africans takes a departure from the usual and old ways of resolving conflicts? If the black South Africans are able to reconcile with the whites, with all their horrendous deeds, why can't the Hutus and Tutsis, or the Somalis be reconciled and direct their efforts towards building a common and peaceful future? This can only be possible if the *dramatis personae* of these acts are ready for a new understanding that will enable them not only to reconcile them with others but also with themselves. I hope that there are a lot of valuable ideas in our philosophies of life, cultures and outlooks that will enable us to reconcile and build a peaceful social life. It is one of the challenges of African philosophy to find out such ideas in the cultures of the

peoples. The commitment of African philosophy to the cause of the peoples of Africa and the issue of relevance can only be measured in its ability to deliver such ideas.

Underlining the importance of sagacity F. Ochieng-Odhiambo said, "... philosophic sagacity is in itself a useful source of information, knowledge and education. In Africa today, there has been a concern that the youth hardly know about their cultures."<sup>15</sup> We largely have educational systems that do not have respect for the home-grown values and various forms of indigenous knowledge. We should be able to change the situation that has already taken root and which assumes that the ideas of humanism, democracy, freedom and so on, which are Western, are the only genuine ones. Our education, therefore, must be one which tries to strike a balance between the good things that we could get from abroad and the good things also that we could cultivate from the indigenous forms of knowledge. Considering how the political elite abused and continue to abuse the hard won independence we can say that the future of Africa must lie in the younger generation that has to, however, be educated a bit differently. This is a young generation that truly wants to address the issues of poverty and backwardness.

We need a young generation that is capable of addressing the problems of our societies with a degree of complexity. Our societies are at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. We must know and appreciate the values contained in the indigenous knowledge, so that we can discover that indigenous knowledge, including sagacity, are useful sources of knowledge and education. Given that such type of knowledge is mostly not preserved in writing, it is exposed to the danger of disappearing unnoticeably. One should



only remember the saying that in Africa when an old man dies it is tantamount to the burning down of a library. But if we pay the necessary attention to unraveling the wisdom that some of our elders have, we save a considerable part of our heritage from disappearing and at the same time use it for practical purposes.

An African philosophy that does not try to address itself to such a situation may not have an important role and value in Africa. An African philosophy that attempts to be only speculative without having to contribute to the solution of Africa's problems is a luxury that Africa can not afford at present. Resolving conflicts peacefully with the help of ideas that are indigenous entails two important points.

In the first place it is part of an important project of decolonizing the mind. If we have thought that conflicts could only be resolved through Western legal and institutional means alone, we only have to realize that this phenomenon has always been part and parcel of traditional African life. Secondly, we can not assume that there are problems of human relations that can not be resolved by talking to each other. In addition to the various proverbs and sayings that form part of daily life in most parts of Africa, if we take the considered and thought-out ideas of the sages, what they tell us is that a peaceful and harmonious life can be made possible if we are able to listen to each other and sort out our problems in a peaceful way.

## Notes and References

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- 2 Odera, Oruka H. (ed.), (1990) *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp 15.
- 3 *Ibid*, 6.
- 4 Ochieng-Odhiambo, F., (1997) *Philosophic Sagacity Revisited*, in A. Graness and K. Kresse (Eds.) *Sagacious Reasoning: H. O. Oruka in Memoriam*, Frankfurt / Main: Peter Lang, pp 173.
- 5 Oruka, H. *op.cit.* pp 53.
- 6 *Ibid*, pp 45.
- 7 Mandela, N., (1995) *Long Walk to Freedom*, London: Abacus, pp 25.
- 8 Kaunda, K. quoted in K. Wiredu, (1995) *Conceptual Universals in African Philosophy: Four Essays*, Ibadan: Hope Publishers, pp 53.
- 9 *Ibid*, pp 53.
- 10 Oruka, H. *op. Cit.*, pp 44.
- 11 *Ibid*, 44. In fact this reminds me of the 17th Century Ethiopian sage, Zara Yaqob, who because of his ideas which ran counter to the prevailing ideas, had to abandon his village until things changed. (Cf. C. Sumner, (1976) *Ethiopian Philosophy*, Vol. II., Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press).
- 12 *Ibid*, xxvii.
- 13 Presbey, G. M., (1997) "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. Published in German as "Zur Praxis der afrikanischen 'Weisen'. H. Odera Orukas Herausforderung an die Selbstbeschränkung akademischer Philosophen." Translated from English by Jadwiga Adamiak. *Widerspruch - Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, München: Germany, pp. 74-93.
- 14 *Ibid*.
- 15 Ochieng-Odhiambo, F. *op.cit.*, pp 178.