Abstract

Various methodologies have been formulated and advanced in answer to the question: what is the appropriate method to follow in order for African philosophy to be valid or authentic? Today, we have C.S Momoh's "Canons of Discourse in African philosophy", Barry Hallen's "Cultural Thematic", William Abraham's "Cultural Essentialism", Kwesi Wiredu's method of "renewal or reconstruction", Olusegun Oladipo's "method of relevance", Peter Bodunrin's "Universal philosophy", Paulin Hountondji's "Scientific philosophy" and Late Odera Oruka's "Philosophic Sagacity". This paper concerns itself with Odera Oruka's Methodology of the conservation approach in his "Philosophic sagacity". The conservation methodology in African Philosophy is that method which subscribes to the interview, discussion and dialogue approach. In this method, African Philosophy is conceived as a joint venture and product of both the ancient (traditional) as well as modern African Philosophers. And philosophic sagacity is a term late Odera Oruka coined in Nairobi Kenya, to describe a reflective evaluation of thought by an individual (not collective) African elder who is repository of wisdom, knowledge and rigorous critical thinking. We set out to examine the implications, challenges, problems and limitations of Oruka's methodological recommendation for the study of ancient (traditional) and contemporary African Philosophy.

Introduction

Contemporary African Philosophy poses a methodological problem. The problem of methodology comes as a response to the question of authentic African Philosophy. Some scholars think that the answer to the question of authentic African Philosophy is in the method of writing and presenting African Philosophy. The question here is: how do we investigate, formulate and or present authentic African philosophy? Do we follow the analytic or scientific method? Or the descriptive and chronological sequence? Do we have to live among the African people as Placide Tempels suggests? Must we go with tape recorder in hand and hold discussions or conservations with African elders or sages as Professors Odera Oruka, C. S. Momoh and Barry Hallen propose? Or do we simply study, analyse and interpret the thought, myths, proverbs and culture of Africans as Professors K. C. Anyanwu, J. O. Sodipo and John Mbiti want us to do? Or do we simply take Western Philosophy as the "yard stick" against which to do African Philosophy, as Professors Kwesi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji and late Peter Bodunrin want us to do? Or better still, do we accept the recommendation of R. A. Wright of the Conceptual and Comparative approach in investigating African Philosophy. What is the right or appropriate method to follow, in order for African philosophy to be valid?

To a scholar like Late K.C Anyanwu, the question of methodology in African Philosophy is not necessary, rather, life and experiences not methodology should determine the validity of any philosophy that is worthy of that name ("Philosophical significance" 271). Anyanwu particularly thinks that "philosophical insight and creative vision do not depend on method but on several factors like personal sensitivity and commitment to certain problems of experiences. And furthermore, it is the subject matter that determines its own methods. (Problem of method 135). What really matters to Anyanwu is the formulation of the problem. This is because if the problem is ill-formulated or inappropriate, the methodology will not save us from erroneous and invalid conclusions. What eludes Anyanwu, however, is that in formulating a problem, a particular methodology would eventually be used in analyzing or in solving the problem. The point is that we cannot really run away from the question of methodology (Azenabor 67).

Consequently, today, various methodologies of research have been formulated and advanced in answer to the aforementioned questions. Today, we have C.S. Momoh's "Canons of Discourse in African philosophy". Barry Hallen's "Cultural thematics", William Abraham's "Cultural Essentialism", Kwesi Wiredu's "Method of "Renewal or reconstruction", Olusegun Oladipo's "method of Relevance", Peter Bodunrin's "Universal Philosophy", Paulin Hountonondji's "Scientific
Philosophy” and late Odera Oruka’s “Philosophic Sagacity”. This paper concerns itself with late Odera Oruka’s methodology of the conversational approach in his “Philosophic Sagacity”.

The conversational methodology in African philosophy is that method which subscribes to the interview, discussion and dialogue approach. In this method, African philosophy is conceived as a joint venture and product of both the ancient (traditional), as well as modern African Philosophers. The stages or foundation of this methodology was set by Prof. Paul Radin’s position of the existence of autonomous intellectual class in traditional societies in his book *Primitive Man as Philosophers*. In this book, Radin talks of primitive philosophers. In this respect, Radin means that in every human group, there are individuals who occupy themselves with basic problems of what we normally call philosophy to look out for individuals viewpoint along side communal beliefs. Others scholars who are in favor of this method are Prof. C. S. Momoh, Prof; Barry Hallen, Prof. J. O. Sodipo, Prof. Odera Oruka, and Prof. Wiredu to an extent.

Odera Oruka’s Method of Philosophic Sagacity

Philosophic sagacity is a term late Prof. Odera Oruka coined in Nairobi, Kenya, to describe the kind of philosophic activity which Momoh in Lagos, Nigeria calls, "Ancient African Philosophy" and Kwesi Wiredu of Ghana tagged "Traditional African Thought or Philosophy", a reflective evaluation of thought by an individual African elder who is a repository of wisdom, knowledge and rigorous critical thinking. Philosophic sagacity attempts to articulate the thoughts, ideas and views of individual African sage reputed for wisdom, presenting them as authentic African philosophy. The real purpose of the research into sage philosophy, Oruka told us "was to help substantiate or invalidate the claim that traditional African peoples were not capable of logical and critical thinking (sage 17).

And in order to establish this thesis, Oruka conducted a number of dialogues with individuals in traditional Kenyan societies and identified them by names. Another aim of Oruka's exercise, according to him, is to give an all acceptable and decisive blow to the position of ethno-philosophy, by presenting an individualized as against collective views of traditional Africans.

Odera Oruka defines African philosophy as the work dealing with a specific African issue, formulated by indigenous African thinkers or by a thinker versed in African cultural and intellectual life (Trends, 112). On our part, we defined African philosophy as the reflection of an African or non-African, on how Africans (whether ancient or modern) make sense of their existence, condition and the world in which they live in, based on the African cultural experience, history, tradition and reality (Azenabor, Understanding 18). Consequently, African philosophy is embedded in both the oral and written traditions of Africa (Oladipo, 334).

In his article, "sagacity in African philosophy” and his book *Sage Philosophy*, Oruka presents an aspect of African philosophy embedded in the thought of African sages. Oruka maintains that among the traditional folks of Africa, uninfluenced by modern education, there are genuine philosophers; people capable of fundamental reflection on man and the world, such people are able to subject the folk philosophy of their own communities to criticism and modification. These people are known as sages.

A sage, according to Oruka, is usually an opinion leader, who is frequently consulted by people, because he is versed in the wisdom and traditions of his people and is wise within the conventional and historical confines of his culture. A sage is usually a custodian of custom and traditions of his people or society.

Philosophic sagacity is a reflection of a person who is both a sage and a thinker, because a person can be sage and not a thinker- this would be an ordinary sage, while the one who is both sage and a thinker is a philosophic sage. Oruka then makes an elucidatory exposition between an ordinary sage, who he calls culture philosophers, and a philosopher's sage.

As an 'ordinary sage" Oruka argues, the person is versed in the wisdom and tradition of his people, and more often than not, is recognized by the people themselves as having this gift. Being a sage, "does not necessarily make a philosopher; some of the sages are simply moralists and the disciplined, die-hard faithful to a tradition. Others are merely historians and good interpreters of the history and customs of their people. (Sagacity 177). The point is that some sage are wise, but their wisdom according to Oruka is within the conventional and historical confines of their culture (but then, whose wisdom isn’t?). The ordinary sages are spokes-men of their people alright, but they speak what is already known by every Tom, Dick and Harry of their culture or community. So these types of sages do not rise beyond the sphere of ordinary sagacity. This is precisely, why according to Oruka, they are "culture philosophers". They are sagacious but not philosophic. Consequently, they are not able to cope with any foreign innovations that encroach on their culture. The sages here, we are told are usually poets, herbalists, medicine men, musicians, fortune tellers, etc.
As a philosophic sage, a person is more than just wise; he is wise in terms of being rational and critical in understanding or in solving the inconsistencies of his culture and coping with the foreign innovations that encroach on it. People here are not just sagacious elders but sage philosophers or philosophic sages - they rise beyond the sphere of sagacity to the realm of thought and become thinkers. "As thinkers, they opt for or recommended only those aspects of the belief and wisdom which satisfy their rational scrutiny. In this respect they are potentially or contemporarily in clash with the die-hard adherent of the prevailing common beliefs" (178). Such sages that have risen from the realm of mere sagacity to philosophic heights "are also capable of conceiving and rationally recommending ideas offering alternatives to the commonly accepted opinions and practices. They transcend communal wisdom (178). Their reflections serve as a source of reforms to the people and offer insightful solutions to issues, questions and fundamental problems so, using the power of reason rather than the celebrated beliefs of the communal consensus and explanation, the philosophic sage is said to produce a system within a system and an order within an order.

Still on comparing "philosophic sagacity" with "ordinary sagacity" or "culture philosophy", Oruka writes:

Beliefs or truth-claims within a culture philosophy are generally treated as absolute - philosophic sagacity, however, is often a product of a reflective re-evaluation of the culture philosophy. The few sages who posses the philosophic inclination make a critical assessment of their culture and its underlying beliefs. (178, 179).

The culture philosophy is the first order activity, while philosophic sagacity is a second-order activity, a critical reflection on, if not a rebellion against, the first order conformity. "While the first order activity is purely absolutist and ideological, the second order is generally open-mined and rationalistic. Its truths are given as tentative, and ratiocinative, not as God sent messages", (179).

The ordinary sage or culture philosopher is otherwise called ethno-philosopher, especially because his explanations or thoughts do not go beyond the premises and conclusions given by the prevailing culture. Oruka, however, points out that culture philosopher is not quite the same with ethno-philosophy. He writes:

Culture philosophy consists of the beliefs, practices and myths, taboos and general values of a people which govern their everyday life and are usually expressed and stored in oral vocabulary of the people. Ethno-philosophy on the other hand, is a written work of some scholars claiming to offer an objective description of the culture philosophy of a people. As a trend of thought, ethno-philosophy is much recent than culture philosophy which dates back to the days of the first ancient. In historical order, Philosophic sagacity antedates ethno-philosophy but is second-order to culture philosophy (Sage 6, 7).

Oruka tells us that sage philosophy consists of two kinds:

a. The way of thinking and explaining the world by Popular Wisdom.
b. The way of thinking and explaining the world by Didactic Wisdom.

The first is the well-known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths. Here, we have the folk sage: his thoughts do not go beyond folk wisdom. This is philosophy at first-order level. The second is the expounded wisdom and the rational thought of some given individuals within a community. Here, we have the philosophic sage; who makes an independent and critical assessment of what people take for granted. This is philosophy at second-order level. The point is that while first-order philosophy is a representative world outlook of a people or a given culture, second-order philosophy is a critical reflection of an outlook. Popular Wisdom is often conformist, whereas, Didactic Wisdom is, at times, critical of communal set-up and popular wisdom. Oruka then presents to us the views of one Paul Mbuja Akoko, a traditional Kenyan, as that of Didactic Wisdom or philosophic sagacity. It is therefore in this method of philosophic sagacity, in Oruka's opinion, that genuine African philosophy can be found.

Implications and Challenges

Oruka's Philosophic Sagacity is based on the premise that:
1. Philosophy is individual—it therefore rejects a collective approach to African philosophy. Hence, he identified those he dialogued with, rather than talk of Kenyans or Africans in general.

2. Literacy is not a necessary condition for Sagacity or philosophic reflection, rather it is the ability to reason, argue with rigor and critical insight. So sages exist in both literate and non-literate societies.

3. African philosophy is embedded in oral and written traditions.

However, the whole exercise by Oruka seems to be a restatement of the tradition of discourse already built by Socrates and a perspective of Abraham's principle of identification. Also in Oruka's distinction between Popular and Didactic wisdom, we see again, that this is not different from Abraham's distinction between private and public aspects of African philosophy. Consequently, philosophy is not just an academic enterprise, removed from practicality. This idea may be too narrow an approach to philosophy.

Oruka's "philosophic sagacity" has been said not to be different from that of Marcel Griaule's "conversation with Ogotommeli", where Ogotommeli, an African elder, displays great philosophic sagacity in the doctrine of his community. Here too, one is after all, writing under the dictate of a primitive thinker. But Oruka anticipating this observation argues that individual art of discourse is not necessarily a philosophy, just like every thinking is not philosophy because a thinking could still constitute a mythological, poetic or literary discourse, rather than philosophical discourse. The point is that not every thinker is a philosopher.

Again, there is the need for us to ask whether or not the tradition of discourse established by Socrates is exactly the same with that of Oruka. This is because Socrates went to the people from place to place, but Oruka seeks out the elders or sages and consult them. The point is that Socrates was not called upon or sought, therefore, differing greatly from the African sages (Presby 32). But this argument is watered down by the fact that both Socrates and Plato wished that Socrates was treated in such manner and complained of his (Socrates) neglect. And Plato in fact complained that the people do not seek out the philosophers as they seek out a doctor when suffering from illness. So it seems that the African people had only moved ahead of the Athenians or Ancient Greeks, in seeking their sages to solve their problems (32). This is philosophical counseling that can be equated to clinical psychology and psychiatry in terms of people's consultation and professional counseling in modern time.

Furthermore, it has been pointed out that while Socrates suffered and was persecuted for his services to his fellow Athenians, his African counterparts are respected and given good treatment. But then, it has been argued "that this good treatment is a sign that the sages had not been critical enough of their own societies; that is if they had been proper gadflies like Socrates, they would have invited similar persecution: (33). Be that as it may, Gail Presby argues that African sages can pose a challenge to academic philosophers. This challenge is that philosophy has to be made sagacious and relevant to humanity. This is the message of Oruka's philosophic sagacity. But then, philosophy is more of a commitment to inquiry than to answers or conclusion. Consequently, Presby argues that the "sages in so far as they are the "answer men" do not demonstrate the love of inquiry we require in a philosopher" (38). The point is that the real philosopher is not he who "has the answers" but he who enjoys discussing the question".

C. R. Hoffman claims that the proponent of philosophic sagacity is rooted in a classless peasant African society, it cannot be a philosophy but mere peasant story-telling (Oruka 7). To this criticism, Oruka argues that philosophy is primarily a reflection on the fundamental issues of nature, and that such a reflection takes place in every human society, whether it has classes or not. Again, that philosophy, from its history, shows that it may employ stories, poetry, etc. after all, Parmenides, Plato and Heraclitus expressed their philosophies, using epic poem and story telling.

We find Hoffman's claim that African societies are without classes or that traditional African societies are "mere classless peasant societies and therefore cannot have a philosophy", as particularly disturbing. But in order not to be guilty of misjudgments and hasty conclusions, let us try and acquaint ourselves in concrete terms with what is meant by classes or class-struggle. If by classes we mean the distinction in society or the hierarchical arrangement or order, then classes exist everywhere in the world, and there can never be a classless society; distinction in the society can never be abolished. But Marx or Lenin did not use classes in this context. By classes, Marx meant that a person or group will have absolute monopoly not only of the means of production but also the means of distribution, and every other person is dependent on somebody else for survival and sustenance. And Lenin on his part defines classes as:
Large groups of people which differs from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to means of production, by their role in social organization of labor, and mode of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they can appropriate the labor of another, owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy (Qtd in Babu 126).

Consequently, master servant and exploiter exploited relationship is a necessary force for classes to manifest.

Now, considering the above conceptions of classes, does it not exist in traditional or ancient African societies as claimed by Hoffman? Considering the fact that we have no means of production, we are not industrialized nations, and our produce are still dependent on foreign investments, and that peasants in Africa can exist independently of any capitalist, one may be tempted to agree with Hoffman that there really are no classes in traditional African society. But to do this, will be to view issues in a simplistic and rather pretentious manner. The histories of Mali Empire, Songhai, Yoruba Kingdoms, etc. were all dominated by struggles- but then, one can quickly point out that these were tribal "struggles for influence". However, there were cases of slaves owners; there were cases of palace boys, who perpetually depended on the Chiefs and Kings or Obas for their means of livelihood. The difference perhaps is that the slaves or palace boys were not quantified- they were not bordered about how much they were putting in and how much they were taking - out- they were not aware of the surplus value. But this is not to say that there were no conflicts or classes.

Problems and Limitations

A critic may want to point out that philosophic sagacity reduces the whole idea of philosophy to Wisdom. It is true that etymologically speaking, the idea of philosophy is "love for wisdom", but then, wisdom is not necessarily philosophy, rather, a philosopher must have wisdom or wisdom is part of philosophy. And Oruka had already pointed out that the aim of sage research is not to claim that sagacity is, by definition, philosophy but to look for philosophy within sagacity (Sage 41).

Oruka's claim that philosophic sagacity is best equipped to give a decisive blow to the position of ethno-philosophy, has been said not to be fully defensible, since it can be shown that philosophic sagacity, as defined by even Oruka himself, seems to be an attempts at a mere revision of the principle of ethno-philosophy (Keita 202). The thesis put forward by Oruka that philosophic sagacity differs from ethno-philosophy or culture philosophy on the ground that philosqphy differes fromethno-philosophy on the ground that philosophic sagacity entails critical and individual thought, while ethno-philosophy does not, is said not to be sustainable. This is because "any belief must have been first initiated by an individual thinker or a restricted group of thinkers before becoming generally accepted belief systems (202).

Consequently Oruka by his methodology of African philosophy has been charged with doing ethno-philosophy and social anthropology which utilizes oral literature and interview method. But then, Oruka had argued that philosophy sagacity distance itself from this criticism because whereas social anthropology and ethno-philosophy in their methodology get as many similar answer as possible and establish a common belief or get a common representation of the information received from the informants, philosophic sagacity on the other hand, does not have the objective of a communal consensus on any question or problem. Rather, Philosophic sagacity identifies individuals, who are acknowledge as wise in the community and dialogue is made with them, showing that their ideas go beyond mere communal wisdom and that they offer critical explanation to issues and problems.

However, the relationship between ethno-philosophy and philosophic sagacity has been clearly presented by Wiredu as follows:

... there is an intimate relationship between the thought of the individual sage philosophers and the communal world outlooks of their people. It is the communal thought which provides a point of departure of the sage philosopher. It provides, in fact, his philosophical education and must in ways determine his theoretical options. On the otherhand, the communal thought itself is the pooling together of these elements of the thought of individual philosopher of the community that remains struck in the common imagination (Makinde 109).

Oruka has been accused of putting words into the mouth of his informants and coming out with a refined story about his people traditional views and that "the whole exercise is un-philosophical
since one does not have to go the field to interview people in order to do philosophy" (Bodunrin 169)
since the philosopher is not an ethnographer. Furthermore, this method would involve translation.
And critics have pointed out the difficulties and complexities of the translation process it is not easy to
perform adequately as a translator. Again, the translation process may involve the imposition of the
translator's own conceptual apparatus on the culture. The point is that it may be difficult to avoid
confusing the information or idea elicited from the interpretation given to it.

The proponents of the conservational approach or method have pointed out that their method
is the Socratic Method. Socrates had, like a mid- wife, helped the sages to give birth to their
otherwise implicit ideas by playing the role of philosophical provocateur hereby helping the sages and
him to jointly arrive at a new philosophical thought or system. So, Oruka, Momoh, Sodipo and Barry
Hallen are only doing what is traditional to philosophy, except that Hallen and Sodipo in their own
methodology were communal, instead of being individual. But even then it has been argued that the
idea of individualism and collectivism is not even enough to draw a line, because even communal or
ethno-philosophy was initially started off by an individual and the individualized philosophy can easily
become collective when it is shared by others and becomes a world view. This is precisely why it is
not easy to draw a rigid line between individualism and collectivism- they can shade into each other.
Again, if it is un-philosophical to go to the field to interview people in order to do philosophy, can we
also say that one does not have to go to the library to read Plato? After all, this is not the traditional or
initial method of philosophy.

One may argue, like late Prof. P. O. Bodunrin in fact did, that the method of Oruka and other
like him, is not the same as the Socrates method because Socrates in "Platonic Dialogues" discusses
with "Etymologists like Euthyphro (Cratylus 396) after whom Plato named the "Euthyphro", renowned
Orators like Georgias (Symposium 198), mathematicians like Theatetus (Oruka "philosophy sagacity 183"). This assertion is, however, not correct, for in "Platonic Dialogues" Socrates also discusses with
Meno's lad in the Meno, who, had never been taught any mathematics. In short, everybody engages
the attention of Socrates. So, "there is no legitimate philosophical thought or system (182, 183). It has
however, been argued that if we have to do like Socrates, that is, claim the whole ideas as
philosophers. After all, Socrates never said his philosophy was that of the individuals he held
discussions with or that it was for both of them. They were simply known as the view of Socrates -
the "Socrates Dialogues". So, why would sage philosophy not be simply that of the professional
philosophers?

The main problem with the conversational approach, as it was with Socrates is that since it is
a joint production of both the sage and the interviewer or "mid-wife", the philosopher may end up
injecting his own thought or philosophy into those of the elders or sages, just like Plato did to
Socrates. Then, it becomes difficult to draw the line. The problem here, according to Bodunrin, then
becomes that of authorship. Who owns the new idea or product- the sage or the philosopher? But
then, Oruka, while granting this observation, adds that "we must also grant, as a matter of historical
fact, that nearly all philosophers, including even the professionals such as Moore and Russell hold
their philosophies as joint works with those philosophers who initially inspired or provoked them. Most
of the philosophers come to create new ideas or style or philosophy only as a result of responding to
the ideas, style or works of some other philosophers or persons (Keita 209). It follows that the
outcome of the professional philosophers interview with the sage or African elder no less belongs to
the sage or elder than the thoughts of professional philosophers reacting to others, belong to them.
The outcome of the whole exercise then is really a joint creation of two, and no person can claim the
sole responsibility, Oruka posits.

But then, Oruka's comparison, we must point out, is incongruous. The examples of
philosophers he cited were not joint works or projects but mere reaction to works of others. The two
works were separately done: So we have to make a distinction between works, conferences, debates
e tc. serving as influences or reaction to a philosopher and the type of joint work or effort we see in
sage philosophy.

Conclusion

We conclude by noting that different methodologies of research in African philosophy have
emerged; all are to be seen as intellectual challenges. No methodology should be over flogged
because there is no single or universally accepted method in philosophy. Philosophical discourse can
assume any dimension. Bodunrin seems to have settled this long ago when he wrote that "there is no
method which is the method of philosophy today" (Bodunrin 172). But then, does it mean anything
can pass as philosophy? How do we then prevent abuses and arbitrariness in the method of
presentation of African philosophy? Not exactly, the real point that is being made is that "the tradition
of the analytic philosophers condemning continental philosophy as irrational and non-
philosophical
just because it does not fit within the analytic tradition can no more hold sway. Oruka's sage philosophy project was meant to demonstrate that such a move cannot be intellectually justified. Philosophers do not have to belong to the same methodological tradition, even though they cannot opt out of reason (Oluwole 159).

Generally, three approaches seem to have emerged in the methodological question. Some scholars advocate a sovereign methodology to the study of African philosophy to be situated against the back drop or context of Western philosophy, for comparison with those aspects of Western philosophy that we are familiar with (especially the cultural aspect), and apply them for analysis. And still some others would prefer African philosophy to simply be a variant of Western philosophy in methodology: preceding with analysis, precision, generalization, rigor and synthesis, since these are the methodology Western philosopher will appreciate. Scholars emerge with various methods of research or approaches depending on their schools and sub-schools of thought in African philosophy.

Be this as it may, the reality, of things today is that we have now have an orientation in contemporary African philosophy, which is taking into consideration the socio-economic transition, the role of industrialization, modernization (not Westernization) impact of scientific and technological development and the form and content of modern education. Philosophy has consequently become urbanized and institutionalized. This development has affected the traditional life and is making Oruka's idea of Philosophic sagacity, in contemporary African philosophy to become vacuous. This is especially because, as Wiredu puts it, "foreign philosophers have intervened in our culture. In some parts of Africa, it is Islam that has intervened; in other parts it is Christianity. In all, there have been varying degrees of complication arising from the fact of colonization. The consequence of this is that the contemporary African philosopher derives his education from cultural sources that are distinct from African culture (Oladipo 336). The African is alienated! But then the real problem, according to Wiredu, is not variation of sources but its lack of reflective integration.

Works Cited


