

# **Odera Oruka's Philosophic Sagacity: Problems and Challenges of Conversation Method in African Philosophy**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the implications and challenges of Odera Oruka's conversation approach to the study of contemporary African philosophy as enunciated in his "Philosophic sagacity". In Oruka's method, African philosophy is conceived as a joint venture and product of both the ancient (traditional) and modern African philosophers. Consequently, it utilizes interview, discussion and dialogue.

## **Introduction**

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", Kwasi Wiredu's "Renewal or Reconstruction", Olusegun Oladipo's "Method of relevance", Peter Bodunrin's "Universal philosophy", Paulin Hountondji's "Scientific philosophy", and Odera Oruka's "Philosophic sagacity". The term "philosophic sagacity" was coined by Odera Oruka to describe a reflective evaluation of thought by an individual (not collective) African elder who is a repository of wisdom, knowledge and rigorous critical thinking.

This paper examines the implications and challenges of Odera Oruka's conversation approach to the study of contemporary African philosophy as enunciated in his "Philosophic sagacity". In Oruka's method, African philosophy is conceived as a joint venture and product of both the ancient (traditional) and modern African philosophers. Consequently, it utilizes interview, discussion and dialogue. The paper first gives an outline of various approaches to African philosophy proposed by African philosophers. It then gives an exposition of Oruka's method of philosophic sagacity, before reflecting on several implications and challenges to its employment.

### **Approaches to African Philosophy**

Contemporary African philosophy poses a methodological problem, in view of 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 questions here are: 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 conversations with African elders or sages as Odera Oruka, C. S. Momoh and Barry Hallen imply? Do we simply study, analyze, and interpret the thought, myths, proverbs and cultures of Africans as K.C. Anyanwu, J.O. Sodipo and John Mbiti want us to do? Or do we simply take Western Philosophy as the "yardstick" against which to do African philosophy, in line with the prescriptions of Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji and Peter Bodunrin? Or again, might we be better off accepting the recommendation of R.A. Wright of the Conceptual and Comparative approach in investigating African philosophy? What is the appropriate method to follow, in order for African philosophy to be authentic?

To Anyanwu (1989, 271), the question of methodology in African philosophy is not necessary; rather, life and experience, rather than methodology, should determine the validity of any philosophy that is worthy of that name. Anyanwu particularly thinks that "philosophical insight and creative vision do not depend on methods but on

several factors, like personal sensitivity and commitment to certain problems of experience. Furthermore, it is the subject-matter that determines its own methods” (Anyanwu 1989, 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 1995, 67).

Consequently, various methodologies of research have been formulated and advanced in answer to the aforementioned questions. One of them is C.S. Momoh’s “Canons of discourse in African philosophy”. Momoh in his articles (Momoh 1985, Momoh 1989, Momoh 1988) identifies five “canons of discourse” in African philosophy, as methodological and critical recommendation for studying African philosophy. These are (i) Paul Radin’s principle of the existence of autochthonous intellectual class in traditional society, (ii) Gordon Hunnings’ principle of synthesis, (iii) Robin Horton’s principle of departmentalization, (iv) William Abraham’s methodological recommendations which entails:

- (a) The discussion of issues within the context of a spatio-temporal paradigm
- (b) A distinction between private and public aspects of African philosophy
- (c) The principle of identification, and,
- (v) Campbell Momoh’s principle of classifications.

Another methodology is Barry Hallen’s “Cultural thematics” (Hallen 1991). This is based on the method of getting hold of sufficient descriptive, expository accounts of traditional African thoughts to have them written and eliciting their philosophical potentials or import. Hallen’s methodology is also the conversational approach, but using the pure descriptive and expository method, otherwise known as the phenomenological approach in African philosophy.

There is also William Abraham’s “Cultural essentialism” (Abraham 1962). This methodology makes philosophy pragmatic. It emphasizes the usefulness of philosophy to African societies, based on African mind and cultural paradigm. Kwasi

Wiredu's method of "Renewal or Reconstruction" (Wiredu 1980), is another methodology. It implores us to examine the intellectual foundation of our cultures for possible reconstruction or renewal. Olusegun Oladipo's method of "Relevance" (Oladipo 1992) hinges on the reminder that African philosophers should have as their primary task how to be relevant to their societies - both physically and socially - in order to contribute to self knowledge in Africa.

Peter Bodunrin's method of "Universal philosophy" (Bodunrin 1981) is posited against the idea of "Cultural philosophy". He argues that philosophy is a professional and theoretical discipline like physics and mathematics, with universal application and character, and with a well-known methodology, and like the aforementioned disciplines is universal- there is a way of writing, teaching and doing philosophy all over the world. In short, philosophy, by its method, is culturally neutral.

Paulin Hountondji's methodology (Hountondji 1983) revolves around the scientific orientation in African philosophy. This, according to him, is because for there to be a philosophy in any culture, there has to be a scientific tradition in it.

Finally, we have Odera Oruka's method of "Philosophic sagacity" (Oruka 1990, Oruka ed. 1991). This paper concerns itself with Oruka's methodology of the conversational approach in his "Philosophic sagacity". Oruka's method has been specifically chosen for interrogation because he is one of the foremost and inspiring philosophers who cast his philosophical nest into the indigenous territorial waters. This effort of his is in line with the need to make concrete and decisive attempts at establishing African philosophy in the traditional setting. Furthermore, while other African philosophers insist there must be a distinction between African and Western philosophy and are pre-occupied with African traditional thoughts, presenting them as communal thought systems, Oruka particularly rests his views on the conviction that philosophic sagacity constitutes the best refutation of communal thoughts as African philosophy. The other approaches to African philosophy could be seen as ineffective, because they could be accused of smuggling Western techniques and categories into African philosophy.

## **Odera Oruka's Method of Philosophic Sagacity**

Philosophic sagacity is a term coined by the Kenyan philosopher, Odera Oruka. It describes the kind of philosophic activity which Momoh in Lagos, Nigeria, calls "Ancient African philosophy" (Momoh 1985, 77-78) and Kwasi Wiredu of Ghana tagged "Traditional African thought or philosophy" (Wiredu 1980) - 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 Africans reputed for exceptional wisdom, presenting them as authentic African philosophy. The real purpose of the research into sage philosophy, Oruka tells us, "was to help substantiate or invalidate the claim that traditional African peoples were innocent of logical and critical thinking" (Oruka ed. 1991, 17). And in order to establish this thesis, he 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 ethnophilosophy, by presenting individualized as against collective views of traditional Africans.

Oruka's methodology is otherwise known as the conversation method in African philosophy - that approach which subscribes to the interview, discussion and dialogue. 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 stage or foundation of this methodology was set by Paul Radin's assertion of the existence of autochthonous intellectual classes in traditional societies, in his book *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, where Radin talks of primitive philosophies. 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. Radin therefore advises any scholar researching into any area of African philosophy to look out for views of individuals along side communal beliefs. Other scholars who are in favour of this method are C.S. Momoh, Barry Hallen, J.O. Sodipo and Kwasi Wiredu to an extent (Momoh 1989, 51).

Oruka defines African philosophy as the work dealing with a specific African issue, formulated by an indigenous African thinker(s), or by a thinker(s) versed in African

cultural and intellectual life (Oruka 1990). Consequently, African philosophy is embedded in both the oral and written traditions of Africa (Oladipo 2002, 334).

In his article, "Sagacity in African philosophy" (1991), Oruka maintains that among the traditional folk of Africa, uninfluenced by modern education, there are genuine philosophers - individuals capable of fundamental reflection on man and the world, and able to subject the folk philosophy of their own communities to criticism and modification. He referred to such individuals as "philosophic 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. Thus a sage is a custodian of the traditions of his people. Philosophic sagacity is a reflection of a person who is both a sage and a critical thinker, because a person can be a sage and not a critical thinker (this would be an *ordinary sage*), while the one who is both a sage and a critical thinker is a *philosophic sage*. Oruka then makes an elucidatory distinction between an ordinary sage, who he calls a "culture philosopher", and a philosophic sage.

On the one hand, an "ordinary sage", Oruka argues, is a person 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" (Oruka 1991, 177). Thus the ordinary sages are spokesmen of their people alright, but they do not rise beyond the sphere of ordinary wisdom. 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.

On the other hand, a "philosophic sage" is not only wise, but also capable of being rational and critical in understanding or solving the inconsistencies of his or her culture, and coping with foreign encroachments on it. Such people are not simply

sagacious elders, but philosophic sages - they rise beyond the sphere of sagacity to the realm of critical thought. "As thinkers, they opt for or recommend 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 adherents of the prevailing common beliefs" (Oruka 1991, 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" (Oruka 1991, 178). Their reflections serve as a source of reform to their people, and offer insightful solutions to issues, questions and fundamental problems. Therefore 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 absolutes ... Philosophic sagacity, however, is often a product of a reflective re-evaluation of the culture philosophy. The few sages who possess the philosophic inclination make a critical assessment of their culture and its underlying beliefs (Oruka ed. 1991, 178-179).

Culture philosophy is a first order activity, while philosophic sagacity is a second-order one - a critical reflection on, if not a rebellion against, the first order conformity. It is generally open-minded and rationalistic. Its truths are given as tentative and ratiocinative, not as God sent messages (Oruka ed. 1991, 179). The ordinary sage is also known as culture philosopher. Oruka, however, points out that culture philosophy is not quite the same as 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 (Oruka ed. 1991, 6-7).

Thus Oruka tells us that sage philosophy is of two kinds (Masolo 2006):

- 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 the communal set-up and popular wisdom. Oruka then presents to us the views of one Paul Mbuya Akoko, a traditional Kenyan, as that of didactic wisdom or philosophic sagacity. Oruka sees the philosophic sage as constituting an important resource of genuine African philosophy in contemporary Africa.

### **Implications and Challenges**

Oruka's philosophic sagacity is based on the following premises:

1. Philosophy is individual: this is a rejection of a collective approach to African philosophy. Hence Oruka identified those he dialogued with, rather than talking of Kenyans or Africans in general.
2. Literacy is not a necessary condition for philosophy, so that philosophers exist in both literate and non-literate societies.
3. African philosophy is embedded in oral and written traditions (Oruka ed. 1991, 37).

One of the challenges that Oruka's philosophic sagacity attempts to meet is the need to buffer the two extreme views in contemporary African philosophy:

One [view] is that African philosophy is only folk philosophy. The other is that folk philosophy is not philosophy proper and that African philosophy cannot escape the

requirement that it must be a written, critical, reflective discourse. Between the folk philosophy and written critical discourse, sage philosophy comes as the third alternative: it demonstrates the fact that traditional Africa had both folk wisdom and critical personalized philosophical discourse (Oruka ed. 1991, 43).

Thus Tsenay Serequeberhan (1991, 19) correctly describes sage philosophy as Oruka's attempt to carve out a middle way between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy.

On the issue of literacy, D.A. Masolo (2005, 24) observes that it is correct that literacy in and of itself does not constitute a measurement for philosophizing. But so would oral expression alone be a hindrance to philosophy. For Masolo, the real point is that philosophy is characterized by some form of 'tradition', that is, by a sustained discursive enquiry, rather than by a simple expression of ideas (Masolo 2005, 22). This is precisely the point being made by Masolo when he reminds us that "only the interpretation of a point of view about the essence and about the realities of life ... falls within a domain of philosophy" (Masolo 1994, 238). Paulin Hountondji (1983) adds that non-literate cultures like the one interrogated by Oruka could not have produced 'strict' philosophy on their own without being provoked by professional philosophers. But then how do we know or substantiate this claim? Hountondji has not substantiated it with any rational argument. Hountondji's other criticism is that "philosophy ... cannot develop fully unless it writes its memoirs or keeps a diary" (Hountondji 1983, 105). This later argument is watered down because Oruka has already documented the sages' ideas. So Oruka does not claim that African philosophy must continue to exist in oral form.

It has also been asserted that Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity is not different from that of Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmel*, where Ogotemmel, an African elder, displays great sagacity in the doctrine of his community. Here too, one is after all, writing under the dictate of a primitive thinker. But Oruka in anticipating this objection argues that the individual art of discourse is not necessarily a philosophy, just as every mode of thought is not philosophy, because a mode of thought could still constitute a mythological, poetic or literary discourse, rather than a philosophical one. The point is that not every thinker is a philosopher (Oruka ed. 1991, 6).

Moreover, the whole exercise by Oruka seems to be a restatement of the tradition of discourse already initiated by Socrates, and an affirmation of Abraham's principle of identification. Also in Oruka's distinction between *popular* and *didactic* wisdom, we see that this is not different from Abraham's distinction between *private* and *public* aspects of African philosophy (Abraham 1962, 104). Consequently, philosophy is not simply an academic enterprise, removed from practicality.

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 consults them. The point is that Socrates was not called upon or sought, therefore, differing greatly from the African sages (Presbey 1996, 32). But this argument is watered down by the fact that both Socrates and Plato wished that Socrates was treated in such a manner, and complained of his (Socrates') neglect. And Plato in fact complained that the people do not seek out the philosophers as ardently as they seek out doctors when suffering from illness. So it seems that the African peoples had only moved ahead of the Athenians or Ancient Greeks in seeking their sages to solve their problems (Presbey 1996, 32). This is philosophical counseling, that can be equated to contemporary clinical psychology and psychiatry.

Furthermore, it has been pointed out that while Socrates suffered and was persecuted for his service 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" (Presbey 1996, 33). Be that as it may, Gail Presbey 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 conclusions. Consequently, Presbey 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" (Presbey 1996, 38). The point is that the real philosopher is not he/she who "has the answers", but he/she who enjoys "discussing the questions" (Presbey 1996, 38).

This is precisely the issue that Oruka was trying to address in his conversational method. The sage, according to Oruka, should be allowed to discuss the question or topic freely. The researcher is free to raise objections and challenges. The two (i.e. the informant and the researcher or philosopher) are supposed to discuss as partners in an argument (Oruka ed. 1991, 60). The relevant point here is for the sage's contribution to be sufficiently philosophical, such that the effort provokes and generates further discussions and even controversies (Oruka 1997, 65). It is along this line of thought that Masolo agrees with Bodunrin that the possession of the philosophical ability by Oruka's sage, Mbuya, is not enough. There must also be evidence that he was engaged with other sages in organized systematic reflections on the said thoughts, beliefs, world views and practices (Masolo 1994, 239).

C.R. Hoffman claims that the proponents of philosophic sagacity fail to realize that there can be no philosophy in a society without classes. Since philosophic sagacity is rooted in a classless peasant African society, it cannot be a philosophy, but rather mere peasant story-telling (Oruka ed. 1991, 7). <sup>In response to</sup> 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 (Oruka ed. 1991, 8).

We find Hoffman's claim that traditional African societies are "mere classless peasant societies and therefore cannot have a philosophy" to be evidently inaccurate. If by classes we mean the hierarchical ordering of a human group, there can never be a classless society.

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". Nevertheless, , wisdom is not necessarily philosophy; rather, a philosopher must have wisdom, so that 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 rather to look for philosophy within sagacity (Oruka ed. 1991, 41).

Oruka's claim that philosophic sagacity is best equipped to give a decisive blow to the position of ethnophilosophy 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 attempt at a mere revision of the principles of ethnophilosophy (Keita 1991, 202). The thesis put forward by Oruka that philosophic sagacity differs from ethnophilosophy or culture philosophy on the ground that philosophic sagacity entails critical and individual thought, while ethnophilosophy 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" (Keita 1991, 202).

Thus Due to Oruka's methodology, he has been charged with doing ethnophilosophy and social anthropology, both of which utilize oral literature and the interview method. Nevertheless, Oruka had argued that philosophic sagacity distances itself from this criticism because whereas social anthropology and ethnophilosophy in their methodology get as many similar answers as possible and establish a common belief or get a common representation of the information received from the informants, philosophic sagacity does not have the objective of a *communal consensus* on any question or problem. Rather, philosophic sagacity identifies *individuals*, who are acknowledged 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 explanations to issues and problems. However, the relationship between ethnophilosophy 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 many ways determine his theoretical options. On the other hand ... the communal thought itself is the pooling together of these elements of the thought of individual philosophers of the community that remains struck in the common imagination (Makinde 1989, 109).

Oruka has been accused of putting words into his informants' mouths, and coming out with a refined story about his people's traditional views, and that "the whole exercise

is un-philosophical since one does not have to go to the field to interview people in order to do philosophy” (Bodunrin 1981, 168), since the philosopher is not an ethnographer. Furthermore, this method must come to terms with the challenges inherent in the process of translation, which may involve the imposition of the translator’s own conceptual apparatus on the culture of the philosophic sage. The point is that it may be difficult to avoid confusing the information or idea elicited from the informant on the one hand, and the interpretation given to it by the translator on the other.

Moreover, even when indigenous languages are translated, there is still the problem of correctness in the translation. Quine in his “Principle of indeterminacy of Translation” is said to have emphasized certain areas of discourse in which it is impossible to convey the exact meaning of an original assertion into a translated one. The difficulty here, according to Quine, is more evident when dealing with a system involving beliefs, worldviews and other social values, all of which are culture dependent (Sogolo 1992, 27-28). The point is that in translation the original meaning may not be conveyed. All we have, at times, is a mere reductionism, which conceals. This is precisely the point made by Masolo, when he talks of the untranslatability of some Yoruba expressions into English (Sogolo 1992, 22). Consequently, the method of philosophic sagacity could be made fertile for the establishment of discourses of philosophy directly in African languages. This is the basis of the clarion call for African philosophy in African languages, as espoused by Sophie Oluwole (1997, 160-161). This idea of African philosophy in African languages seems to reduce philosophy to semantics and philology. But philosophy is essentially the articulation of concepts rather than words. Language is simply a medium of expression and communication, so that any language used in philosophy depends on the target audience and the reality of the situation. Furthermore, philosophy deals with ideas, which themselves precede language.

The proponents of the conversational approach have contended that theirs is the Socratic method. Socrates had, like a midwife, helped the sages to give birth to their otherwise implicit ideas by playing the role of philosophical provocateur, thereby helping the sages and him to jointly arrive at a new philosophical thought or system. So Oruka, Momoh, Sodipo and Hallen are only doing what is traditional to

philosophy, except that Hallen and Sodipo in their own methodology are 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 ethnophilosophy was initially started off by an individual, and the individualized philosophy can easily become collective when it is shared by others and becomes a worldview. This is precisely why it is not easy to draw a rigid line between individualism and collectivism. Again, if it is unphilosophical 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 was not the initial method of philosophy.

One may argue, as Bodunrin in fact did, that the method of Oruka and others like him is not the same as the Socratic method, because Socrates in “Platonic Dialogues” discusses with etymologists like Euthyphro (“Cratylus” 396d) after whom Plato named the “Euthyphro”, renowned Orators like Georgias (“Symposium” 198c), and mathematicians like Theaetetus (Oruka 1991, 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 objection to a philosopher helping or provoking another to give birth to a new philosophical thought or system” (Oruka 1991, 182-183). It has however been argued that if we have to compare the conversational approach to the Socratic method, then we have to do like Socrates, that is, claim the ideas generated as those of the professional philosophers. After all, Socrates never said his philosophy was that of the individuals he held discussions with, or that it belonged to both of them. Thus to date we speak of the “Socratic Dialogues”. So, why would sage philosophy not be simply that of the professional philosophers? The fundamental problem with sage philosophy, according to Sophie Oluwole (1997, 159), is that Oruka failed to draw a clear distinction between an ancient tradition of African philosophy and the contemporary emergent one.

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 “midwife”, the professional philosopher may end up injecting his own thought 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 professional ones, 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 of philosophy only as a result of responding to the ideas, style or works of some other philosophers or persons” (Oruka ed. 1991, 51). It follows that the outcome of the professional philosopher’s 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.

However, Oruka’s comparison, we must point out, is incongruous. The examples of philosophers he cited were not *joint* works or projects, but mere *reactions* to works of others. The two works were separately done. So we have to make a distinction between publications, conference proceedings, debates, etc. serving as influences on a professional philosopher on the one hand, and the type of joint work or effort we see in sage philosophy on the other. Bodunrin, we are told, had argued that he and other scholars do not deny the ability of traditional Africans to philosophize on their own. What they denied however, is the likelihood that such individuals could initiate and develop a tradition of philosophy in the modern sense of the word (Oluwole 1997, 151).

Jay Van Hook points out that there is a problem of classification in sage philosophy. This problem relates to the distinction between folk or ordinary sages and philosophic sages. Van Hook observes that the criteria for such a classification although clear in theory are blurred in practice (Van Hook 1995, 58). This is precisely because, during conversations, sages are not aware of this categorization. Furthermore, “the criteria for sagacity in general and philosophic sages in particular, are themselves part of the larger debate – about what is philosophy and who is a philosopher – which has preoccupied African philosophical circles for the last fifty years or so” (Presbey 1997, 195).

## **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. Bodunrin seems to have settled this long ago when he wrote that “there is no method which is the method of philosophy today” (Bodunrin 1981, 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? The point being made here is that philosophers from one tradition are not justified to dismiss their counterparts from other traditions simply because of a difference of methodology. As Oluwole (1997, 159) put it, “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.”

Generally, two main approaches to the methodological question in African philosophy seem to have emerged. Some scholars advocate a sovereign methodology 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 subjecting them to analysis. Others prefer African philosophy to simply be a variant of Western philosophy - proceeding by analysis, precision, generalization, rigor and synthesis, since these are the methodologies Western philosophers will appreciate. Upon reflection, it becomes clear that the methodological problem in African philosophy has its roots in the various schools of thought (Azenabor 2000, 23-56).

The reality is that we have an orientation in contemporary African philosophy which is taking into consideration the socio-economic transition entailing the impact of scientific and technological development, and the form and content of modern education. Philosophy has therefore become urbanized and institutionalized. As such, the contemporary African philosopher derives his/her education from cultural sources

that are distinct from African culture (Oladipo 2002, 336). This development has affected the traditional African way of life, and is making Odera Oruka's idea of philosophic sagacity in contemporary African philosophy to become vacuous.

Be that as it may, sage philosophy is philosophically significant for its approach to the growth of knowledge. It has made a positive contribution to the establishment of African philosophy, unlike others who chat and fret interminably with their subject-matter. Its "Africanness" is anchored in a peoples cultural experience and tradition. And it has become "a useful avenue in assisting to formulate a systemic national culture" (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 1997, 177). It fosters cultural reawakening. Furthermore, philosophic sagacity according to Ochieng'-Odhiambo (1997, 178) "is in itself a useful source of information, knowledge and education".

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