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Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance, and Future

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Introduction

For historical reasons, African sage philosophy focuses on the views of traditional indigenous sages. I will not attempt to expound these reasons immediately, as my first concern is to shed some light on the nature of sagaciousness.¹

Most people will agree that a sage is a person who is exceptionally wise. In addition to exceptional wisdom, Henry Odera Oruka suggests a second criterion for sagaciousness. A true sage, he urges, must habitually use the gift of wisdom for the ethical betterment of his or her community. Consequently, he or she has to be consistently concerned with the ethical and empirical problems arising in his or her community with the intention of finding insightful solutions to them. In Oruka’s view, the second criterion is what distinguishes a sage from a sophist (1990: xvii–xviii).² I agree.

Three works stand out as sage philosophy’s most widely accepted specimens: Marcel Griaule’s Conversations with Ogotemmeli (1965), Odera Oruka’s Sage Philosophy (1990), and B. Hallen’s and J. O. Sodipo’s Knowledge Belief & Witchcraft (1997).³ This chapter revolves around these classics. I have chosen this classical approach for its double advantage. Besides familiarizing the reader with the general character of sage philosophy, it exposes him or her to some of the major substantive issues that have arisen within this trend of African philosophy.

Methodology

Every work of sage philosophy involves a professional philosopher interviewing some person whom he or she regards as a sage. The conjunction of this chapter’s opening statement and the two criteria of sagaciousness provides a threefold methodological checklist for any philosopher desirous of contributing to this trend of African philosophy. Such a philosopher must ensure that all his or her interlocutors are traditional, exceptionally wise, and satisfy the ethical criterion. Let us now examine the extent to which the authors of our classics have utilized this checklist.
Griaule makes no direct attempt to argue the traditionality of his interlocutor. Presumably, he saw no reason to question Ogotemmeli's traditionality, hailing as he did from Dogon country, a region of present-day Mali, whose inhabitants "were thought to present one of the best examples of primitive savagery" (1965: 1) at the time of the interview (1947). Hallen and Sodipo argue for the traditionality of the Yoruba onisegun (medicine men) on whose analysis of epistemic terms their work is based. To those who would insist that the onisegun are not traditional on the grounds that they have been touched or influenced by a "scientific" outlook that is not indigenous, their reply is that none of the onisegun they relied on "have undergone formal education or speak the English Language. Consequently there is no significant avenue by which such influence could have been conveyed" (1997: 74). Likewise, to ensure reliance on "genuine representatives of traditional Africa in a modern setting," Oruka limits his interviews to those who are "free from the effect of Western scholarship." Ideally, such people are rural and illiterate (1990: xvii, 6).

When it comes to deciding the exceptional wisdom of his interlocutors, Oruka's practice is to follow the lead of the community from which they hail (ibid., xviii). Hallen and Sodipo follow the same practice and base their work on the analysis of some twelve onisegun regarded as wisest within their community by both their clients and the members of their professional society, the egbe (1997: 13). Griaule describes Ogotemmeli as a person "endowed with exceptional intelligence and a wisdom the fame of which has spread throughout his country" (1965: 2). So, his own estimation of Ogotemmeli came to coincide with that of the Dogon community in granting him an eminent epistemic status. What Griaule does not specify is what role, if any, communal consensus played in shaping his conviction that Ogotemmeli was exceptionally wise. A brief discussion of the role of communal consensus in the exploration of sage philosophy is appropriate at this juncture.

A philosopher interested in sage philosophy typically plunges him or herself into a rural African village and solicits from a cross-section of the villagers names of community members they believe to excel in wisdom. He or she then proceeds to interview and to record those individuals who receive a preponderance of nominations. This is what following the lead of the community means. But, as Oruka points out, communal consensus alone does not guarantee an individual's exceptional wisdom. Hence, the philosopher must habitually assess the wisdom of his or her interlocutors. Additionally, to eliminate sophists from his pool, he or she must regularly scrutinize the behavior of those interlocutors he or she deems to be wise to ensure that they use their wisdom for the ethical betterment of their communities (Oruka 1990: xviii). Furthermore, the philosopher must remain vigilant for any information that could detract from the interlocutors' traditionality. It is imperative for the philosopher to constantly assess the traditionality, the exceptional wisdom, and the ethical character of his interlocutors throughout the course of his or her research. For what is at stake is a threefold checklist for constant referral rather than a series of chronologically ordered steps. We will now examine the extent of our authors' utilization of the third item of the checklist (the ethical criterion).

Since Oruka personally suggested the second criterion of sagaciousness, it is safe to assume that he regularly assessed the behavior of his interlocutors to ensure that they used their wisdom for the ethical betterment of their communities. The other
authors don’t make explicit reference to the ethical criterion. However, since they portray their interlocutors as popular counselors, the latters’ compatriots must have perceived them as altruistically motivated. This is how Griaule describes Ogotemmelli’s communal involvement: “Indeed his name and his character were famous throughout the plateau and the hills, known (as the saying was) to the youngest boy. People came to his door for advice every day and even by night” (1965: 15). Similarly, after describing the onisegun’s unparalleled epistemic status within their community, Hallen and Sodipo conclude as follows: “One therefore finds the onisegun being asked to give advice and counsel about business dealings, family problems, unhappy personal situations, religious problems, and the future, as well as about physical and mental illness” (1997: 13).

Beyond the threefold checklist, our authors don’t share much else in common besides transcribing and translating the original dialogues. Oruka exhibits the least degree of “tampering” with the original data, as his final product comprises no more than English translations of the original dialogues. In contrast, Griaule rarely quotes Ogotemmelli directly. His book is so dominated by his own summary statements of Ogotemmelli’s expositions of the Dogon world-view that it is difficult to distinguish the interlocutor’s message from Griaule’s speculations.

Hallen and Sodipo’s involvement with the original data goes beyond mere translation as well. Their main project consists in comparing the meanings of the Yoruba terms mo and gbagbo with those of their supposed English equivalents. According to certain Yoruba-English dictionaries which Hallen and Sodipo regard as the “established translation manual” (etm), the respective English equivalents are the terms “know” and “believe.” Their first step consists of a four-tier analysis of the two English terms to determine their respective references, objects, criteria, and varieties. They base this analysis on several “standard Western philosophical works and a bit of common sense” (1997: 40). Next, they proceed with a similar analysis of the terms mo and gbagbo, relying on data gathered from the Yoruba onisegun mentioned above. They do this by collating these diverse data and then comparing them to select the meanings for the terms they deem most representative of the Yoruba conceptual system. Finally, they compare these meanings with the meanings of “know” and “believe.” Hallen and Sodipo characterize their overall method as “conceptual analysis,” and regard the onisegun as “colleagues” in a “collaborative analysis” of the Yoruba terms (ibid. 8, 10, 124).

Because Griaule and Hallen and Sodipo communalize their results by attributing them to entire societies, Oruka describes their works as anthropology rather than philosophy (1990: xxvi). As we shall see in the next section, he reserves the label “philosophy” for portions of his final product.

Results

Griaule believes the Conversations to be a synopsis of Dogon metaphysics as “laid bare” by Ogotemmelli in the course of 33 days of “conversations.” At least this is the picture emerging from the book’s first 15 pages, in which an impression is created that Griaule is about to do for the Dogon what Tempels did for the Bantu in
Bantu Philosophy (1959). Tempels, to whose work Griaule likens his (1965: 2), reconstructed what he regarded as the basic explanatory ontological principles underlying Bantu culture. Unfortunately, one searches the Conversations in vain for any explanatory ontological principles comparable to those of Tempels except for occasional references to the notion of the life force. Griaule's explanations of Dogon beliefs and practices are in terms of mythology rather than ontology.

The main conclusion of Oruka's sagacity research in western Kenya is that there are two kinds of sage in traditional Africa: folk sages and philosophic sages. Whereas both kinds of sage excel in their knowledge of traditional cultural thought, they are distinguishable by their attitude toward it. Folk sages take a first-order attitude toward cultural thought in that their thought never manages to transcend the traditional confines. In contrast, a philosophic sage adopts a second-order attitude toward cultural thought: he or she rises above cultural thought and makes an independent, critical assessment of it, accepting only those aspects of it that satisfy his or her rational scrutiny. Oruka believes that unlike the utterances of folk sages, which are all best characterized as cultural thought, the critical utterances of his philosophic sages deserve the label "philosophy."

The "meanings" Hallen and Sodipo obtain from their four-tier analysis of "know" and "believe" turn out to be significantly different from those they obtain from the analysis of their Yoruba counterparts of mo and gbogbo. From this they conclude, contrary to the etm, that neither of the English terms has the same meaning as its supposed Yoruba equivalent.

The sharpest contrast in meaning revealed by Hallen and Sodipo is between "know" and mo. This is due to one of the criteria they assign to the term mo. According to their analysis, the two criteria for mo are ri (visual perception) and the recognition of the perceiver's eri okon (etm: heart and mind, apprehension) that what is perceived is ooto (etm: truth). In other words, where P is a proposition, a person S has imo (the noun form of mo) that P only if S has seen that P and S's eri okon has witnessed that it is ooto that P. When it comes to knowledge that, Hallen and Sodipo contend that its two uncontroversial criteria are truth and belief. That is, a person S knows that P only if it is true that P, and S believes that P. The criterion of ri so sharply distinguishes the meaning of imo from that of knowledge that it is possible for a person who possesses knowledge that P to fail to possess imo that P. For example, the average American knows that Christopher Columbus was the first European to visit the Americas. But he or she cannot mo anything about Columbus whom he or she cannot see first-hand. Like all information based on second-hand sources or testimony, any information the average American possesses about Columbus is relegated by the Yoruba to the second-best epistemic level of igbagbo (the noun form of gbagbo).

The point of difference between the two systems that we find to be of greatest significance is the relative role of testimony or second-hand information. In the Yoruba system any information conveyed on the basis of testimony is, until verified, igbagbo. In the English system a vast amount of information conveyed on the basis of testimony is, without verification, classified as "knowledge" that. Much of the latter is information that the individual concerned would not even know how to verify. Yet it is still "knowledge" that. (Hallen and Sodipo 1997: 81)
Is it possible to have instances of belief that fail to be *igbagbo*, or vice versa? This question cannot be answered from Hallen and Sodipo’s analysis alone. Despite their effort to dissociate *igbagbo* from “believe” by rendering it as “agreeing to accept what one hears from someone” (ibid. 64), Hallen and Sodipo do not provide a clear-cut criterion comparable to what was given in the case of *ri* that sharply distinguishes the meaning of “believe” from that of *igbagbo*.

Significance and Future

Sage philosophy was conceived as part of a general reaction to the position of classical anthropology regarding traditional Africa that dominated the first three decades of the twentieth century. Epitomized by the works of Levy-Bruhl, classical anthropology denied all abstract thought to the traditional African, whom it described as a savage with a primitive mentality (see Irele 1983). Griaule responded to this description by undertaking a study of the cultural thought of a traditional African people, the Dogon, using one of their leading traditional sages, Ogotemmeli, as his informant. This study convinced Griaule that, contrary to the claim of classical anthropology, Dogon culture had produced an abstract metaphysics whose principles grounded and animated all Dogon institutions, customs, laws, rituals, and so on. Griaule attached such great significance to his “discovery” that he believed it would put to rest the claim of classical anthropology as well as “revolutionize all accepted ideas about the mentality of Africans and of primitive peoples in general” (1965: 2).

The “discovery” of abstract thought among traditional Africans was not enough to convince all Africanists that the best of traditional Africa’s thinkers operated at the same level of intellectual sophistication as their Western counterparts (the scientists). Robin Horton (1967) typifies these skeptics. He claims that there is a remarkable similarity between traditional thinkers and scientists in that both groups seek to explain the visible world in terms of the invisible world. Traditional thinkers try to do this in terms of the actions of gods and spirits, and scientists in terms of theoretical entities such as atoms and waves. So, the thought systems of both groups contain a theoretical component. But Horton sees a big difference between traditional thinkers and scientists when it comes to the attitude toward their respective theoretical beliefs. For traditional thinkers, the theoretical postulates constitute a revered, closed system that must be accepted uncritically: a system of indubitable beliefs that renders empirical testing superfluous. In contrast, scientists regard their theoretical postulates as open to criticism, further empirical testing, and subsequent revision.

Hallen and Sodipo believe their research puts a critical check on Horton’s generalizations. They argue that the *imo/igbagbo* distinction among the Yoruba shows that these traditional people (and, a fortiori, their leading thinkers) do not revere their theoretical beliefs to the extent claimed by Horton. This is true, they urge, because the Yoruba do not use the highest epistemic term *imo* to describe these beliefs. Since they are not acquired visually, all theoretical beliefs are relegated by the Yoruba to the second-best epistemic level of *igbagbo*, the level of things one agrees: *imo/igbo* possess true, finally as test (1!

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agrees to accept from others. Most importantly, Hallen and Sodipo argue that the jnum/igbagbo distinction suggests, contrary to Horton, that the traditional Yoruba possess a critical attitude as well as an appreciation of empirical testing. This is true, they contend, because the distinction calls for treating all information critically as merely hypothetical (as igbagbo) until and unless it can pass the empirical test (1997: 72–81, 119–25).

But the authors of the abstract metaphysic “unearthed” by Ogotemmelli are anonymous, and their thoughts are portrayed as the unanimous possession of an entire people. The same is true of the exponents of the Yoruba conceptual system explicated by Hallen and Sodipo. Does traditional Africa provide instances of individualized, critical, second-order thinking? Yes, according to Oruka. He believes the existence of traditional philosophic sages in Kenya proves that this sort of thinking is a permanent feature of Africa (1990: 5–6).

The reader should now be in a position to understand why sage philosophy focuses on the views of traditional sages. It is because, from the moment of its conception and throughout the course of its development, its overarching goal has been to prove that rational thought in its various forms is native to Africa. Sagacity researchers have pursued this goal in one of two ways. Some, such as Griaule and Hallen and Sodipo, have chosen to study traditional African thought systems utilizing those indigenous experts least likely to smuggle foreign elements into them, namely, the traditional sages. Others, such as Oruka, have preferred to look for evidence of second-order rational thought among those Africans most likely to possess it who are also least influenced by Western culture: the traditional sages again.

In addition to its historical role of demonstrating traditional Africa’s rationality, Oruka has identified three other roles for sagacity. First, named individual sages sometimes make valuable philosophical contributions worth the attention of professional philosophers (ibid. xvi. 36). This is true of Mbuya Akoko’s argument for monotheism. Classified as a philosophic sage by Oruka, Akoko disagrees with the traditional polytheism of his ethnic group, the Luo, and offers a reductio ad absurdum argument for monotheism:

God is One Supreme Being for all people. This I can show by reference to the fact of the Uniformity of nature. If there were many gods with similar powers, nature would be in chaos, since there would be conflicts and wars between the gods. But nature is uniform not chaotic: a dog, for example, brings forth a dog not a cat. And a cat produces a cat not a dog or a hen. All this is a proof of One Supreme Mind ruling nature. (Ibid. 32–3)

Sagacity’s second role consists in providing “raw data” for further philosophical reflection (ibid. xvii). A good example is the “psychology” Griaule attributes to the Dogon according to which the self is a compound entity comprising the soul (will and consciousness) and the life force. The life force itself is depicted as a composite entity “made up of portions of the forces of its genitors… and various ancestors…” According to Griaule, the Dogon view death as the separation of the soul from the life force and the disintegration of the latter into its components (1965: 172–3, 180–2). But this psychology is remarkably different from the one reported by
Tempels. From the conviction that the Bantu regard every being as a force, Tempels infers that they equate an individual’s self with his or her life force. Tempels characterizes this life force as a simple (non-compound) entity “endowed with intelligence and will.” According to Tempels (1959: 49–55), it is this undivided life force that the Bantu regard as surviving physical death. Do these disparate accounts reflect actual differences in the way the Dogon and the Bantu view the self? Do they result from misrepresentation of traditional psychology by either Tempels or Griaule? These questions call for serious reflection by African ethnosophists, especially those, such as Innocent Onyewuenuy (1991), who seem to see in Bantu Philosophy the definitive statement of traditional African philosophy.

Sagacity’s third role is in the area of socio-economic development. Convinced that genuine development must be pursued in light of the concrete circumstances of the people whose lives it is meant to improve, Oruka urges African leaders to enlist the input of traditional sages in the process of designing and implementing development policies and programs. This is because he believes the sages understand their people’s culture and the nature of their problems better than most people (1990: 61–2). Indeed, Oruka himself has done a study on family planning involving the inputs of several traditional sages (see Presbey 1998: 10).

A fourth role for sagacity is entailed by Hallen and Sodipo’s work. It consists in supplementing Western philosophy. Because it has developed in relative independence of the rest of the world, Western philosophy has tended to absolutize many untested presuppositions. Sagacity research has the potential to validate, invalidate, or modify some of these presuppositions. One of these is the claim that propositional attitudes are universal. In English, these are expressed by verbs such as “believe,” “know,” “doubt,” “wish,” and “want,” which indicate a person’s attitude toward a subordinate proposition introduced by the word “that,” as in the sentence “John believes that philosophy is hard.” The claim is that these verbs have equivalents in all natural languages. Hallen and Sodipo take their research to invalidate this claim. As we have seen, the two conclude from their analyses that there are no exact Yoruba equivalents for “know” and “believe.” From this they infer that propositional attitudes are not universal (1997: 84). Unfortunately, this inference comes too early. It needs to await further analyses encompassing a more representative sample of propositional attitudes.

Is there a future for sage philosophy, given the growing Westernization of Africa and the resultant gradual disappearance of traditional sages? The answer depends on what the driving force behind future sagacity research will turn out to be. If future research continues the current trend of being driven by the desire to showcase individualized, unwesternized second-order thinking or to utilize uncontaminated expertise in traditional African systems, then sage philosophy has a bleak future. For then, it will have restricted itself to traditional sages, and their demise will mean its demise. But while sagacity research has to focus on the thought of sages, these sages need not be traditional. The traditionality of its sages is just an accidental feature of African sage philosophy. As we have seen, it was the purely historical concern of demonstrating traditional Africa’s rationality that led our classical authors to focus on traditional sages. It is reasonable to think, then, that sage philosophy’s future lies in the hands of those researchers who will be willing to transcend the dialogue will of results is purposes. Th themselvess, useful for it moreover, sc plical issues. S
transcend this concern. Freed from this constraint, such researchers will be able to dialogue with all Africa’s sages: traditional, modern, literate, and illiterate. A wealth of results is bound to emerge from such interactions, which could serve various purposes. They could be valuable as raw data for philosophical reflection or as, in themselves, independent philosophical counsel. Besides, they could yield insights useful for thinking about socio-economic development. In all these connections, moreover, sage philosophy might possibly offer fresh options to Western philosophical issues. Sage philosophy has to adapt to survive.

Notes

1 For the rest of this chapter, the expression “sage philosophy” will be used to designate African sage philosophy.
2 Even though it appears to be an independent criterion of sagaciousness (1990: xviii), consistent concern with society’s problems is, in my view, best treated as a necessary condition for what I am presenting as the second criterion.
3 Hallen and Sodipo’s book was first published by Ethnographica in 1986. All the references in this chapter are to the 1997 Stanford edition.
4 I say “main project” because in chapter 3, Hallen and Sodipo also compare the meaning of the Yoruba term ojey with that of its supposed English equivalent “witch.” My focus is on their main project.
5 Griaule 1965: interviews for days 20, 21, 26, and 27.
6 The distinction between folk sages and philosophic sages is articulated on several occasions in Oruka’s Sage Philosophy: see, for example, pp. 28–9, 44–5. Chapter 6 of Sage Philosophy reproduces the interviews of seven traditional thinkers Oruka classifies as folk sages; chapter 7 is devoted to extended interviews of five philosophic sages.
7 But recall what I have said about the lack of explanatory metaphysical principles in the Conversations.

References