



Gail M. Presby, "The Life and Thought of H. Odera Orika: Pursuing Justice in Africa"

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Gail M. Presby. *The Life and Thought of H. Odera Oruka: Pursuing Justice in Africa.* 2023. 265 pp. \$ 94.95 USD (Hardcover 9781350303850). \$ 31.95 (Softcover 9781350303867).

Gail M. Presby provides a comprehensive intellectual biography of H. Odera Oruka (1944 – 1995) based on her acquaintance with Oruka, interviews with people who knew Oruka, and the examination of unpublished manuscripts. The book is divided into four parts. The book's first part offers a very interesting account of Oruka's upbringing and its possible influence on his later formulation of sage philosophy as a methodological orientation in African philosophy. Of particular interest is the discussion of Oruka's father as a counterexample to the myth of unanimity, which was dominant in ethnophilosophy. This myth amounts to the unsubstantiated claim that in 'traditional societies' everyone agrees—more or less—with everyone else. However, Oruka's father, Peter Oruka Rang'inya, was himself critical of many 'traditional' Luo (the ethnic group that Oruka belonged to) beliefs. For example, his father thought 'the Luo were quite wrong to think of God in physical terms' (13). Thus, Presby emphasizes that Oruka had good reasons for being skeptical about claims to the effect that 'traditional African societies' were dominated by collective beliefs which went unchallenged by individuals.

The second part of the book charts Oruka's formal philosophical education, emphasizing the formative influence of the Swedish philosopher, Ingemar Hedenius (1908-1982) on Oruka. Oruka was trained by Hedenius in analytic philosophy. Hedenius thought that the task of philosophy was to bring its tools to bear on pressing practical issues (39). Oruka accepted this conception of philosophy as oriented around practical issues. Odera would go on to write an M.A. thesis on the concept of punishment (parts of which were published in his 1976 book, *Punishment and Terrorism in Africa*) under the supervision of Hedenius in 1968-69 while studying at Wayne State University in Detroit. Oruka's argument is based on a belief in determinism and a rejection of compatibilism about free will. Oruka claims that since criminal behaviour is the product of economic and social forces over which individual criminals have no control, criminals are not morally responsible for their actions. Therefore, there is no justification for punishing them (54-56). Presby finds Oruka's determinism unconvincing (57), and she challenges his argument on this basis. However, it is important to note that one could accept both Oruka's determinism and his incompatibilism while also maintaining that punishment should not be abolished.

One could believe that no one is morally responsible for their actions while also holding that punishments are necessary for forward-looking reasons, i.e., the rectification of future behaviour.



For example, in many parts of North America, so-called ‘problematic bears’ that approach humans for food are often subjected to what is called ‘adverse conditioning’ using loud noises, tasing, and shooting them with paintballs. This ‘conditioning’ is a form of punishment; however, it is not justified by an appeal to the bears’ moral responsibility for their actions; rather it is justified by its predicted effect in deterring bears from engaging in similar behaviours in the future. Someone could accept Oruka’s claim that criminal individuals are not morally responsible for their actions but still maintain that punishment is justified by appeals to forward-looking considerations without appeal to moral responsibility. Nevertheless, from Oruka’s perspective, it would be possible to argue that, in this case, punishment can only be justified if specific empirical questions about the deterrent effect of punishment are answered. It is interesting to note that while Oruka maintains that African traditions of conflict resolution were anti-retributive and forward-looking, the fact that the anti-retributive approach was, according to him, dominant in many African societies, is not a good reason for endorsing it (71). Instead, according to Oruka, one must devise independent reasons for endorsing a given practice or belief. This goes to the heart of Presby’s book which emphasizes that Oruka sought to selectively embrace traditions, and rejected the wholesale embrace or rejection of pre-existing traditions without careful analysis. This is reflected in his formulation of sage philosophy as a methodological orientation in African philosophy, the focus of the third part of the book.

Presby is concerned with emphasizing that Oruka’s philosophical work was oriented around justice and that his work on sage philosophy contributed to this overriding goal of understanding the normative structure of justice and actualizing it. The fourth and final part of the book centers on Oruka’s contributions to debates about justice in political philosophy with a focus on his contributions to environmental philosophy and global inequality. Of particular interest is how Oruka draws on Locke’s theory of property to argue for land reform (166-167). Presby notes that while Locke’s theory of property has been used to justify indigenous dispossession, it is also implicitly invoked by emancipatory movements such as the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil (167). Thus, it would be too simplistic to claim that Locke’s theory of property is intrinsically oppressive in character.

In the book’s third part, Presby raises important objections to Oruka’s characterization of sage philosophy and is worth examining in some detail. Oruka’s first foray into African philosophy was in 1971 when he published a negative review of Tore Nordenstam’s *Sudanese Ethics* (1968). Presby excavates this early review and rightly emphasizes that Oruka’s hostility to anthropology is

already evident in this early text (102-105). Here, we see some of Oruka's hallmark criticisms of anthropological approaches to African philosophy, such as the accusation that those engaged in such approaches are prone to overgeneralization. Oruka would engage more directly in a critique of ethnophilosophy in his 1972 paper, 'Mythologies as African Philosophy', where he directly takes on Placide Tempels and John Mbiti. Like Paulin Hountondji, who was launching his critique of ethnophilosophy around the same time, Oruka thinks that Tempels and Mbiti are guilty of presenting mythical traditions as philosophy.

Presby raises an important criticism of Oruka; she notes that in his critique of Tempels and Mbiti, he assumes, without providing adequate evidence, that myths and the traditions which transmit them are static and that, consequently, they lack the openness to criticism and transformation that characterizes genuine philosophical discourse. Presby responds that 'those who study oral traditions or ritual practices will note that traditions are always changing, even when people think they are merely reproducing them' (108). However, one can defend Oruka by pointing out that there is a vast difference between an intellectual tradition whose adherents are aware of the fact that it is constantly changing based on a dialectic characterized by arguments, objections to arguments, and responses to objections on the one hand, and on the other hand, an intellectual tradition that is changing but whose adherents at any given moment are unaware of the fact that this intellectual tradition is subjected to change. In the latter case, individuals are likely to think of criticism as a futile activity and perhaps as unnecessary given the fact that this tradition has proved to be functionally adequate for that society's requirements, and they would be unaware of the fact that this tradition has maintained its functional adequacy precisely because it has changed as a function of time.

Presby also raises an interesting objection regarding Oruka's characterization of the differences between his method and the methods used by social anthropologists. Oruka claimed that, unlike the interviews conducted by social anthropologists, his interviews with sages were meant to create free-flowing conversations. However, as Presby points out, social anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz also conduct open-ended interviews to create a free-flowing conversation (118). The other difference that Oruka points out is that he engages in an evaluative enterprise but anthropologists engage in a purely descriptive enterprise. However, as Presby points out, anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard also explicitly made evaluative claims (119). One can defend Oruka by pointing out that the difference is that in Oruka's case, the evaluative claims that he makes are addressed directly to the sages that he interviews (more specifically, they are addressed to the

philosophical sages who are willing to critically reflect on their society's beliefs, as opposed to folk sages who, in Oruka's taxonomy, only act as repositories of their society's beliefs without engaging in a critical evaluation of those beliefs). In contrast, the anthropologists address their evaluative claims not to their interlocutors or 'informants' but to the readers of their anthropological work. Oruka would thus be treating his interlocutors as philosophical peers in a way that the anthropologist is not inclined to do.

Overall, Presby has provided us with a landmark study of the life and thought of Oruka, which will be an indispensable point of reference to those engaged in studying African philosophy, political philosophy, and comparative philosophy.

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