H Odera Oruka’s four trends in African philosophy

When studying Oruka’s classification, keep in mind that he comes from the English-speaking side and does not represent Francophone African philosophy in his classification. The classification by this Nairobian philosopher Odera Oruka of different approaches in African philosophy into broader trends is well known, and gives rise to heated controversy. He uses a four-fold classification: (1) ethnophilosophy (ideas of philosophers who try to reconstruct a traditional Bantu or indigenous world-view), (2) sage philosophy (ideas of African sages on selected philosophical issues), (3) nationalist-ideological philosophers (ideas of politicians on the social, cultural and economic reconstruction of African countries in a post-colonial era), and (4) professional philosophy (ideas of professionally trained students and teachers of philosophy in Africa). Schematically, it may be represented as follows:

As already mentioned, Oruka’s classification enjoys support by most African philosophers. For that reason our prescribed text for this chapter will be taken from Oruka’ works.

Analysis of text

This article dates from 1978. Oruka revised it a few times, but we decided to use the original version. On the one hand, this version made quite an impact when Oruka first read it as a paper at a conference and published it. It was widely discussed and praised or criticised, and it had a marked influence on the development of African philosophy because it provided a framework for the study and discussion of African philosophy. Its categories are still in use today. Thus it is a historical piece, but also an influential piece with which students of African philosophy should come into contact. It has its shortcomings. The different approaches are dealt with in an abstract way – Oruka does not give examples and thus does not classify specific philosophers. This leads to a further problem, that of who belongs where in his categories. For example “négritude” looks as if it belongs under ethnophilosophy, but Senghor can be seen as a professional philosopher. The category of professional philosophy as such may be questioned because it is a different kind of category from the others and too hospitable – different approaches are put there in spite of radical differences.
With this goes another point. Oruka clearly operates from a specific view of the nature of African philosophy. According to him there is no radical difference between European and African philosophy – philosophy remains philosophy irrespective of where it is practised. This is of course not a generally accepted view. This view explains the position of professional philosophy. Oruka is actually distinguishing between philosophy and what he sees as quasiphilosophy or non-philosophy in Africa. Some philosopher objects to Oruka’s implicit condemnation of ethnophilosophy as quasi-philosophy. They think that ethnophiliosophers “can present to the discourse of African philosophy both interesting and useful material on which to draw for analyses of the traditional and cultural manifestations of African existence”. They indirectly suggest that the ethnophilosophy category should have had the more positive label of cultural philosophy.

Furthermore, at the time when this article originally appeared, sage philosophy was not much of a trend. Oruka’s important publications on the topic appeared later. In this respect the article was not descriptive, as it was supposed to be. But in spite of all these and other criticisms it remains a publication worthy of note. Seeing that the article is short and its content supposed to be descriptive and thus not that difficult, we shall not work through it section by section.