

ESSAY ABOUT MY SCHOLARSHIP

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My three areas of specialization are: African philosophy, Political Philosophy, and Gandhian Philosophy of Nonviolence. There is some overlap in these three categories. Upon perusing my publications, viewers no doubt will notice the preponderance of these themes, and may see topics, such as “sage philosophy,” of which they are not yet familiar. What follows is a narrative of my growth as a scholar, and an explanation as to how I became interested in these three topics.

First let me explain to the readers of this brief how I got interested in African philosophy in general, and Odera Oruka’s philosophy specifically. In fact, it has surprised me often how after having presented a paper on some aspect of sage philosophy at a conference, the first question will not be about the substance of my argument, but a more general question: how did I ever get involved in studying African philosophy? I will also try to clarify for readers how my interests in social and political philosophy, and philosophy of nonviolence, intersect with my interest in African philosophy. I therefore argue that there is an overall continuity in my research projects, reaching toward a common purpose, which is greater and deeper cross-cultural understanding leading to a more peaceful and just world.

I was born in Detroit, and grew up in a typical, segregated white middle class suburb, attending Catholic school. We never learned much about Africa other than that children were starving there. I became interested in philosophy at an early age. I got special permission to attend college philosophy and comparative religion classes while still in high school (at Macomb Community College). While I was early on interested in poverty and injustice in the world, especially ever since as a teenager picking up a copy of Ronald Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* at my parish book sale, I did not focus on Africa for quite a while. The peace movement which I became engaged in (Detroit’s Catholic Worker community) was more involved with Central America, which became my area of interest throughout the 1980s and early 90s. My same mid-teen years saw me an early convert to vegetarianism, due to the study of Gandhian nonviolence. Studying for my B.A. in philosophy at University of Detroit, I was greatly influenced by Art McGovern, S.J., among others, who had me further exploring the intersections between philosophy and social justice. I was also concerned with overcoming the racial divides in my city and throughout the U.S.

Impressed with their commitment to justice in Central America, I decided to stick with the Jesuits for graduate school, attending Fordham University. I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on Hannah Arendt’s theory of political action, with James Marsh as my mentor. Arendt’s ideas were much in vogue at the time, and fellow graduate student Nemi Que, S.J., wrote his thesis applying Arendt’s ideas to the Philippines context. While researching on Arendt, I noticed her debates with Gandhi and Frantz Fanon. I became interested in Fanon’s ideas. My readings of Fanon helped me to realize the extent of my interest in the political situation of post-colonial Africa.

My interest in Africa was further encouraged by another graduate student at Fordham, Emmanuel Eze. Eze is now well known for his many publications in the field of African philosophy. But back then, he was telling me about a field that I didn't know existed. He suggested that the best approach for me to learn about African philosophy would be to first read African novels. I started with Wole Soyinka's *Ake: Years of Childhood*, and moved onto Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. While I knew I wanted to research Africa, my first trip after finishing the Ph.D. was nevertheless India, to take a summer course in Gandhian philosophy. But upon beginning my first full time university teaching position, in addition to creating a Peace Studies program, I became involved in a multicultural education curriculum. It was one of my students who, attending my "Religion and Social Concerns" class, wanted to know why we weren't studying African religions. I began educating myself on Africa so that I could share what I had learned with my students. I also got involved with two other like-minded professors to put together our Introduction to Philosophy reader that would present the field from a cross-cultural perspective.

I finally made it to Kenya in 1993, where I met and worked with Prof. Odera Orika, the founder of the "sage philosophy" project. Henry Odera Orika was an extraordinary philosopher. We would go down through the rural roads of an off-the-beaten track Kenya, in search of "sages," to write down what had been an oral practice of philosophizing. Without telephones, there was always a matter of chance in these meetings – would the sage we sought be at home, or traceable in the area? Once we found the place, we might be met by family members or neighbors who would fetch the sage. Wives would prepare tea for us as we sat at the feet of an old man, wrinkled, with worn clothes, beaming with character. News of our arrival would travel by word of mouth, and in some cases many elder neighbors as well as many curious youth would gather to overhear our conversations. Tape recorder in hand, the discussions would be transcribed to later be shared with a larger academic world and a general reading audience. My first stay in Kenya was of six weeks' duration.

I was able to come back to Kenya in July 1995 on a sabbatical, and stayed in Africa for one year, the first six months in Kenya, and the second six months visiting seven other African countries. I had arranged for Orika to spend the spring 1996 semester teaching at my university in New York, but his unfortunate death prevented that exchange. I felt strongly that the research he started should continue. Feeling that I had only begun my exploration of sage philosophy, I applied for a Fulbright position and got it, staying on at University of Nairobi for two years, 1998-2000. During that time I developed relationships with those who had worked with Orika on sage philosophy, especially Chaungo Barasa (included as a sage in Orika's book), and others in the philosophy department. Together with others I interviewed over forty persons with reputations for being sagacious. I also helped organize and participated in annual memorial symposia in honor of Orika.

While Orika and I had different training in philosophy, we had similar interests in issues of social justice. For many decades African countries were manipulated by Cold War interests of the superpowers. Orika was acutely aware that Kenya's current context was

shaped by a colonial inheritance, and continued to suffer in a context of domination and dependence, subjected to a world order that put profits before people. His interest in philosophy was due to his seeing it as a tool to expose injustices and to fight for people's rights using reason and argument. Oruka saw sage philosophy as a key aspect to his larger interest in justice: the project could confront European and American misconceptions about Africans, thereby challenging a system of exploitation; and, by focusing on sages who had an "ethical commitment to their communities," he could popularize role models who had something important to offer a contemporary Kenyan society which too often idolized the West.

In my research on Oruka, I also explore Oruka's contributions to ethics and political philosophy, many of which have up to now received less attention than his work in sage philosophy. I have made comparisons between him and other African philosophers such as Segun Gabegesin. I have furthered my studies on Africa to go beyond Oruka to other key thinkers like Mahmood Mamdani, Frantz Fanon and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba. I have also explored the links between the issues of African politics and the more general field of social and political philosophy found in the works of Hannah Arendt, Axel Honneth, Michel Foucault and others. Unfortunately, most social and political philosophers have focused on Europe and the United States to the neglect of Africa.

I have also continued to pursue my research regarding philosophy of nonviolence in relation to African issues. My renewed emphasis on peace and justice issues can be credited to my coming back to UDM, where I was encouraged to develop this way due to my teaching courses in Peace and Social Justice. I have written and presented papers on nonviolence philosophy and practice in Africa. I have published a review of "Black Hawk Down," the recent film on the U.S. - U.N. intervention in Somalia. I completed a 170 page report on conflict resolution as seen by refugees in Dadaab refugee camp, Kenya, based on my visit there in 1999. I have also recently written and presented a few papers on the related topic of ethnic strife and unjust distribution of resources in Kenya.

Creation of the Catholic Approaches to Peace and Justice course has also encouraged me to begin writing on Catholic figures. I recently published a review of a book that takes an anti-war stand which includes writings of Philip Berrigan and Steve Kelly, S.J. I have reviewed Dean Brackley S.J.'s book on the Ignatian exercises. I have articles on Dan Berrigan S.J.

My time in India during my research Fulbright in 2005 has led to writing several articles on Gandhian nonviolence, which have been presented at conferences and in invited lectures. I am in the process of submitting the articles for publication.

The U.S. government's current "War on terror" has also been food for thought. I have recently edited a book on the topic, which includes a contribution by myself. I have had published, and am still submitting for publication, several articles related to this topic.

One very valuable aspect of my position here at UDM is that I am given the opportunity to teach courses in my areas of specialization. I have taught Peace and Social Justice

(with an emphasis on Gandhian philosophy), Catholic Approaches to Peace and Justice, and African Thought and Culture, all areas of my specialization. In fall of 2007 I am teaching an Advanced Topics in Philosophy course that focuses on terrorism. So, my ongoing research helps me in teaching the upper division courses.