

Interview

African Philosophy, and Non-human Animals

University of Nairobi's Reginald M.J. Oduor

talks to Anteneh Roba and Rainer Ebert

Q: *Could you please introduce yourself and describe your academic career?*

Dr. Oduor: I am a Kenyan, born in 1963 in Eldoret, a town in the Rift Valley. However, my ancestral home is Ugenya, a part of the former Nyanza Province, now part of Siaya County. As I had total visual disability from the age of one, I studied at the Thika School for the Blind up to O-level. I then undertook my A-level studies at Thika High School, a regular boys' school, where we were only two boys with visual disabilities; yet, the two of us came out top in a class of ninety-five boys.

Between 1984 and 1987 I attended Kenyatta University near Nairobi, where I studied for a Bachelor's degree in Education, with literature and religious education as my teaching subjects. That is where I first encountered philosophy, and got very interested in it. With the encouragement of one of my lecturers, now Professor C. M. P. Oniang'o, I successfully applied for a scholarship to undertake post-graduate work at the same university, which I then did between 1987 and 1990. My Master's thesis was a philosophical study on how to improve the moral education program that had been introduced in Kenya under the name "Social Education and Ethics".

In November 1989, I joined the teaching staff of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya as a Graduate Assistant. In May 1991, I was promoted to Tutorial Fellow at the same university.

In March 1992, I moved to the College of Education and External Studies, University of Nairobi as a Tutorial Fellow, and in November of the same year I was appointed Lecturer.

Over the past twenty-two years, I have taught introductory courses in ethics, socio-political philosophy, logic, African philosophy, philosophy of religion, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of the social sciences and contemporary philosophy. However, I have a special interest in political philosophy, ethics and philosophy of religion.

In 2008, I became the founding Editor-in-Chief of the New Series of *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya*, which serves scholars with broad interests in the humanities and social sciences by disseminating original articles with a philosophical outlook, with emphasis on intellectual, social and political issues that are of special relevance to contemporary Africa. The journal had been founded by the late Professor Odera Oruka in 1974, but went under around 1982. The New Series of the journal can be found at <http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index>

In December 2011, I received my Ph.D. degree in Political Philosophy from the University of Nairobi for my thesis titled “Ethnic Minorities in Kenya’s Emerging Democracy: Philosophical Foundations of their Liberties and Limits“. It is a presentation of the rationale for incorporating principles for the protection of ethnic minorities into Kenya’s constitution.

Q: What is African Philosophy?

Dr. Oduor: A straightforward answer to this question is close to impossible. This is because over the past sixty years or so, beginning with the publication of Placid Tempels’ *La Philosophie Bantoue* (1945) and its English translation *Bantu Philosophy* (1959), there has been a vigorous debate concerning the existence and nature of African philosophy. Contrary to the widespread colonial belief that Africans were incapable of philosophizing, Tempels suggested that Africans had an elaborate philosophical system that guided their beliefs and behavior.

There are various ways of categorizing the main trends of thought on the existence and nature of African philosophy. The late Professor Odera Oruka saw four main trends of thought, namely, ethnophilosophy (which sees African philosophy as the collective worldview of specific African ethnic groups), nationalistic philosophy (which consists of the prescriptions of African politicians and intellectuals on strategies for the complete emancipation of Africa from the shackles of foreign domination), professional philosophy (which entails the writings of Africans who have studied philosophy in Western universities or in Western-oriented universities in Africa or elsewhere), and sage philosophy (which comprises the thoughts of Africans who are not exposed to Western-type education, but are well versed in their own cultural backgrounds, and adopt a critical approach to their culture) (Oruka 1990, pp. 13 ff.). On her part, Vest (2009) lists ethnophilosophy, excavationist, professional, cultural, and Sage philosophy among the main schools in African philosophy.

At the heart of the controversy about the nature of African philosophy is the debate between particularists and universalists. The former insist that African philosophy cannot reasonably be compared with philosophy from any other part of the world, because philosophy is part of culture, and there are no standards by which to judge one culture to be inferior or superior to another. On the other hand, the universalists assert that truth and logic transcend cultures, so that it should be possible to have a meaningful dialogue between African philosophy and philosophy from other parts of the world. Ethnophilosophy is a paradigm case of particularism, while professional philosophy is an instantiation of universalism.

I happen to be a universalist, insisting that African philosophy is first and foremost philosophy before it is African. As such, it must be assessed by criteria that scholars from all other cultures can relate to. When people ask what African philosophy is, they often expect an answer to the effect that it is very different from philosophy from other parts of the world. Furthermore, quite often, the term “philosophy” as used in relation to Africa is often understood to refer to a *worldview*, as opposed to what it means when used in a Western context. This shift of meaning erroneously suggests that in Europe and North America it is

individuals who philosophize, while in Africa it is whole communities that subscribe to particular worldviews that are then referred to as “philosophies”.

It is also important to note that the debate on the nature of African philosophy should not be surprising, because even the controversy on the very nature of philosophy has not been resolved. Indeed, the various philosophical schools in the West such as existentialism, pragmatism, philosophical analysis and critical realism each defines philosophy in its own unique way.

Q: *Is there a moral philosophy that is distinctly African?*

Dr. Oduor: In the light of my answer to the question about the nature of African philosophy above, I would say that there are moral outlooks that might be distinctly African. However, moral philosophy is the product of individual reflection, and as such, it is trans-racial or super-racial. Interestingly, I do not hear the question as to whether or not there are moral philosophies that are distinctly European; instead, Aristotle’s ethics is his own, as much as Kant’s moral philosophy is Kant’s. Their moral philosophies are not inextricably bound up with their cultural backgrounds. After all, philosophy proper is a critique of culture, not an irrational preservation of it. As the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu once put it, the task of philosophy is to examine the intellectual foundations of human life using the best available modes of knowledge and reflection for human well being (Wiredu 1980, p. 62).

Q: *What is the relation between Western and African Philosophy, and other philosophical traditions?*

Dr. Oduor: As I understand it, the relationship between philosophy from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, America or any other part of the world is that true philosophy, from whatever part of the world, is an attempt at answering fundamental questions that are of concern to mankind – questions of values (axiology), truth (epistemology), ultimate reality (metaphysics) and meaning and logical connections (logic). I have often marveled that no one asks about African physics, African chemistry, African biology, African mathematics, and so on. People seem to understand that each of these disciplines have their own subject matter, methodology and specialist language that transcend cultural contexts. I look forward to the day when this will be true of philosophy. I look forward to the day when people will understand that what makes a philosophy African, Asian, American or European is the cultural context in which it is produced, rather than its methodology and language.

Q: *Can you identify some common themes in the work of contemporary African philosophers?*

Dr. Oduor: Yes. I will talk about three main themes, two positive, and one negative. One of the most common themes in the works of many contemporary African philosophers is

intellectual liberation – the need to follow up the political liberation of our countries with the emancipation of our thought. In this regard, Wiredu’s article, “Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion” (Wiredu 1998), is perhaps one of the most articulate. Furthermore, in the most recent issue of the journal *Thought and Practice*, which I have the privilege of editing, the Zimbabwean philosopher Pascah Mungwini (2011) addresses the need for African philosophers to reject the use of the term “traditional” to describe African thoughts and institutions, as it suggests a discriminatory “otherness” between African and Western cultures and scholarship (see also Oduor 2009a). Another salient theme in contemporary literature by African philosophers is that of the need to utilize the African cultural heritage in the endeavor to come up with political systems that address the needs of the African masses (see, for examples: Mojola 1996; Wiredu 1996, pp. 182-190; Fayemi 2009; Oduor 2011).

Sadly, the debate concerning whether or not there is an African philosophy also still persists in the writings of African philosophers. I say “sadly” because this particular theme is responding to the belief, rampant in Western scholarship for several centuries, that African culture was not only different from Western culture, but also inferior to it. Some of your readers will be familiar with Hegel’s introduction to his *Philosophy of History*, in which he alleged that Africa south of the Sahara was an isolated area not only geographically, but also intellectually; that “Africa proper”, as he called it, was devoid of culture, and as such, totally without philosophical ideas. As Vest (2009) has correctly stated, Africans seeking to respond to questions as to whether or not Africans have the capacity to reason are engaging in perverse dialogues, and thereby squandering time that would be better used in dealing with truly philosophical issues that are of relevance to their continent.

Q: *What is the distinct contribution of African philosophy to philosophy in general?*

Dr. Oduor: I take “African philosophy” to refer to the work of African academics in the field of philosophy. Wiredu (1998) proposes that the African philosopher has a unique opportunity to re-examine many of the assumptions of Western philosophers by subjecting them to an interrogation based on African languages. He gives the example of the concept of *being*, which is so central to Western metaphysics, but quite meaningless in Akan thought. On his part, Masolo (2009) is of the view that the distinctive feature of African philosophizing (*not* African philosophy) is a communitarian outlook expressed through various forms of narrative. Masolo goes on to assert that through migration to European and American institutions of higher learning, African philosophers have had a significant impact on Western philosophy. For Masolo, while a communalistic outlook is part and parcel of African philosophizing, it does not imply an insular approach to identity, but rather accommodates the fact of the dynamism of the sources of identity. Masolo also points out that one implication of the communalistic and narrativistic approach of African philosophizing is that the dichotomy between “analytic” and “continental” philosophy, so common in the West, is not applicable to it. Following Wiredu and Masolo, I think the distinct contribution of African philosophy is that it combines insights from indigenous African cultures with conceptual tools from the

West to produce a way of looking at perplexing issues in a manner that neither indigenous African thought nor Western philosophy could.

Q: *Henry Odera Oruka, who taught philosophy at your department for 25 years until his death in 1995, and who was a leading figure in African philosophy, is best known for his research on Sage Philosophy. Who are the sages and what are their philosophical beliefs?*

Dr. Oduor: In his research on the sages, Oruka intended to demonstrate that Africans, in their indigenous cultural setting, are capable of philosophical reflection. Ochieng'-Odhiambo (1997) has summarized the work of Odera Oruka on the sages as follows:

“In 1974, Henry Odera Oruka, in reaction to the views that had been propounded regarding the nature of African philosophy, started a research project in Kenya entitled ‘Thought of Traditional Kenyan Sages’. The objective of this research was to identify individuals of traditional Kenya who are wise in the philosophic didactic sense, and thereafter write their thought on paper, as proof of the existence of genuine African philosophy in the proper and technical sense of the word. Today the product of this research project is termed *Philosophic Sagacity* and is one of the approaches to the debate on African philosophy.” (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 1997, p. 97)

The sages are individuals who are well versed in their culture, and are also capable of critical, coherent and independent thinking (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 1997, p. 99). In Oruka's own words, the sages are “critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgment by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of communal consensus” (Oruka 1990, pp. 13 ff.). Nevertheless, Vest (2009) is likely to characterize Oruka's effort to prove that there were critical thinkers among indigenous Africans as a perverse dialogue prompted by a desire to respond to a perverse question – that of whether or not Africans have the ability to reason.

Q: *How can contemporary philosophers get access to indigenous African philosophical thought?*

Dr. Oduor: Indigenous African philosophical thought has not been swept away by Western “modernity“. African songs and proverbs present excellent summaries of how indigenous African thought views many issues – love and marriage, politics, distribution of wealth, etc. Furthermore, many African proverbs, fables and legends have already been published, and are therefore available for study and philosophical reflection. Moreover, a people's customs usually have a rationale, and it is that rationale which the sages as presented by Oruka are aware of, while the majority of the members of society are not. A number of fictional and non-fictional books have recorded many such customs, so the scholar can look at them and seek to understand their rationale.

Q: *Should philosophers all over the world study African philosophy?*

Dr. Oduor: I think philosophers from whatever part of the world should seek to familiarize themselves with philosophical ideas from other parts of the world. This is due to the fact that philosophy loathes a hasty claim to absolute truth. This being so, the more exposed a philosopher is to philosophical ideas from many parts of the world, the greater his or her understanding of various possible answers to the issues which he or she wishes to inquire into. As one Kikuyu proverb says, “One who does not travel thinks that only his or her mother knows how to cook.”

Q: *Are there philosophical concepts that transcend cultures?*

Dr. Oduor: I think there are philosophical concepts that transcend cultures. One which immediately comes to mind is respect for human life on the basis that it has inherent worth. The Holy Bible expresses this in terms of the teaching that human beings are made in the image of God; the Western liberal tradition expresses it in the Kantian doctrine of the intrinsic worth of every person based on humankind’s rational faculty; some African cultures view humankind as occupying the apex of the ontological hierarchy of beings. While a few cultures are cannibalistic, most cultures have a deep respect for human life that goes beyond their members’ attachment to their own social formations. Another important cross-cultural philosophical concept is the need for consistency in thought and action. In the indigenous African setting, this was often instantiated in the deep respect for precedence – present action had to conform to previous action, or there had to be a justification for deviating from it. The same idea is enunciated in Western culture by the principle of non-contradiction.

Q: *To what extent do African philosophers attempt to cross cultural boundaries to engage in inter-cultural philosophy?*

Dr. Oduor: They do so to a very great extent. For one, many of the courses in philosophy at African universities (epistemology, metaphysics, logic, ethics, etc.) are almost identical to the same courses at Western universities. Furthermore, many African students go on to undertake studies in which they seek to compare relevant concepts in African and Western cultures. Besides, in the area of political philosophy, African philosophers often attempt to explore ways of making prescriptions that draw from indigenous African thought, but also utilize concepts from various Western philosophers.

Q: *In 1980, the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi split into two departments after a sustained campaign by Mr. Oruka and others. Some time after Mr. Oruka’s death, however, Philosophy merged with Religious Studies again. What is the relation between religious studies and philosophy in Kenyan academia today?*

Dr. Oduor: My own impression is that among the Kenyan academia, there are two main trends of thought on this issue. One insists that philosophy and religious studies are so closely related that it is unreasonable and impractical to teach them as separate disciplines. The second camp, to which I belong, insists that philosophy is so distinct from religious studies, that to try to teach them as one discipline is to distort both and to end up with a monster which is neither philosophy nor religious studies (see Oduor 2010). Indeed, even religious studies has two main aspects, with two distinct methodologies. On the one hand, there is the humanistic approach to theology, where sacred books are studied using methods such as hermeneutics and exegesis. On the other hand, there is the social scientific approach, in which the researcher goes into the field to observe the religious practices of a specific community.

Q: *How would you describe the influence of Christianity and Islam in Kenyan society?*

Dr. Oduor: Islam has been at the Kenyan coast for more than a thousand years. Christianity came into the country towards the end of the 19th century as a result of the vibrant missionary movement in Western Europe. Yet it is difficult to make an accurate general statement about the influence of these two religions on Kenyan society. A large percentage of Kenyans claim to be either Christian or Muslim. However, a far much smaller percentage is wholly committed to adhering to the dictates of the religion they profess. It is also noteworthy that, while many Kenyans profess to be either Christians or Muslims, their utterances and actions also indicate their adherence to indigenous African religions. A useful article on this matter is Ndung'u (2009), which examines the way in which many Africans professing to be Christians are still attracted to the indigenous African approach to healing.

Q: *What is the relevance of philosophical thought in African societies?*

Dr. Oduor: Various indigenous African communities enjoyed interacting with philosophical ideas. This is evident in their use of proverbs. A proverb is usually a summary of a philosophical thought. African fables also often highlighted one or more ethical principles such as honesty or fairness.

In contemporary Africa, philosophical thought influences the way in which people think about the challenges that they face. For example, in the 1980s, there was a court case in which the widow of a prominent lawyer wished to bury her deceased husband in a place different from where her in-laws desired to have him interred. At one stage, the court asked the late Professor Odera Orika to furnish it with his understanding of the issue. Besides, philosophers of education take part in the development of school curricula. In addition, as the Kenyan government seeks to fight rampant corruption, it has used the services of ethicists, alongside those of lawyers, sociologists and psychologists, among others.

Nevertheless, with the ascendancy of neo-liberal policies, many now think that the humanities cannot contribute significantly to economic development. Consequently, there are efforts to

sideline the humanities of which philosophy is a vital part, and students are often told that the government is interested in employing people who have studied the natural sciences.

Q: What role does religion play in African thinking about non-human animals?

Dr. Oduor: According to Tempels (1959) and Mbiti (1969), the African worldview sees the universe as being ordered in a hierarchy of beings, with God at the top, then the long-departed ancestors, the recently departed relatives, humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects at the bottom of the hierarchy. Each of these divisions is hierarchically ordered into species, each of which, in turn, constitutes a hierarchy ordered according to the principle of primogeniture, i.e. rank according to age. For example, Mbiti asserts that “African ontology is basically anthropocentric: man is at the very center of existence, and African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man’s origin and sustenance: it is as if God exists for the sake of man. The spirits are ontologically in the mode between God and man: they describe or explain the destiny of man after physical life. [...] Animals, plants, land, rain and other natural objects and phenomena, describe man’s environment, and African peoples incorporate this environment into their deeply religious perception of the universe” (Mbiti 1969, p. 92).

If Tempels and Mbiti are correct concerning a hierarchical African universe, the killing of animals for food or for sacrifices would be perfectly in order in this worldview because human beings benefit from it. Indeed, quite often when Africans discuss grisly murders such as the ones in Rwanda during the 1994 Genocide or those in Kenya after the disputed 2007 general elections, they will state that human beings killed fellow human beings as though their victims were animals. This implies that the killing of animals is considered to be morally permissible, while the killing of humans is not. It is noteworthy that African creation stories almost invariably present human beings as of infinitely superior worth as compared to other animate beings (see Mbiti 1969, p. 92 ff.). In fact, in indigenous African thought, humans are *not* animals; rather, they are in a class of their own which is much higher than that of animals. As such, even the phrase “non-human animals” is alien to indigenous African thought.

Q: The worldview you are describing reminds one of Aristotle’s hierarchy of being, which provided one of the first rationalizations of patriarchy and slavery. Animal rights advocates insist that we also need to reject this classical concept of natural hierarchy with regard to non-human animals if we want to continue the morally progressive movement that started with the rejection of sexism and racism. Do you perceive the indigenous African belief in hierarchy as morally problematic, and do you see any parallels to Aristotle’s thinking? Do you see similarities between the movement for the abolition of slavery and the struggle for women’s rights on the one hand and the modern animal rights movement on the other?

Dr. Oduor: Yes, the worldview described by Tempels and Mbiti is reminiscent of Aristotle's hierarchy of being. Indeed, some scholars have accused Tempels of simply imposing ideas from his own Western philosophical background onto the African worldview. For example, Neugebauer (1990, p. 51) points out that Cicero, the Roman, had already stated the dictum "force equals being", so that Tempels' purported discovery that, for Africans, „being is force and force is being“ is questionable. Having said that, however, I can confirm that my experience as an African is that my own people, the Luo, have a deep respect for primogeniture. For example, a young person is expected to defer to an older person for the reason that the older person is presumed to be more knowledgeable by virtue of his or her longer life. This outlook suggests belief in a hierarchical universe.

On the question as to whether or not I find a hierarchical view of the universe to be morally problematic, the answer is that I do not. This is due to my conviction that an adequate ethical outlook must be based on sound epistemology. In other words, an ethic that defies raw facts is unrealistic. On the one hand, it is a fact that some forms of existence have an advantage over others. For example, in the African jungle, the lion has an evident advantage over the gazelle – an advantage which suggests that the lion is higher on the ontological hierarchy than the gazelle. Similar hierarchies of advantage are to be seen even in a pack of lions, where there is a clear chain of command. Therefore, if I was to find the idea of hierarchy to be essentially morally problematic, I would have to also assert that the very structure of the universe is morally problematic. At that point, I would have to be willing to work towards the re-structuring of the universe – a venture which seems bound to fail from the outset. What I think can realistically be done is to re-structure the human aspect of the universe. This is to say that we ought to work towards the eradication of all oppression based on sheer human beliefs passed down from generation to generation. For example, there is no objective proof that one human race is superior to another, or that one sex has a right to exploit the other. Any cultural beliefs that encourage oppression based on such subjective apprehensions of the universe ought to be discouraged. On the other hand, there is no real value in denying or condemning the advantages that some animate beings have over others. What we can do is to contribute towards the management of conflicts among various animate beings.

With regard to the possible relationship between struggles against slavery and against the oppression of women on the one hand and animal rights on the other, I personally do not see one. This is due to the fact that the women and the former slaves consciously participated in the struggles for their liberation. On the other hand, the animals cannot be properly said to participate in the struggle for their rights; instead, humans have taken it upon themselves to act on behalf of the animals. This is *not* to imply that humans have a right to mistreat animals: I think that the fact that human beings are rational obligates them to be responsible in their treatment of all sentient beings. Besides, even if it were true that humans have obligations toward animals, the obligations of humans to fellow humans ought to take precedence over humans' obligations to animals out of what might be called loyalty to one's own group. As things stand now, much more effort ought to be put into alleviating the tremendous human suffering in various parts of the world than in promoting the welfare of animals. For example, I would find it difficult for a community to prioritize the survival of the elephant over the preservation of the lives of fellow human beings.

Q: *Does ritual animal sacrifice based on indigenous African religions enjoy support in Kenyan society?*

Dr. Oduor: Currently, most Kenyans do not engage in ritual animal sacrifices, because they do not adhere strictly to indigenous religions. However, a significant minority still practices animal sacrifice. For example, a number of Bantu communities that practice circumcision as a rite of passage slaughter animals to offer their blood to the ancestors during the rite. A number of communities also engage in animal sacrifices as part of their elaborate burial rituals.

Q: *Do you think the practice of ritual animal sacrifices is morally justifiable?*

Dr. Oduor: If we could establish that religious rituals have absolutely no value beyond satisfying the superstitious streak of those who engage in them, then I would say that ritual animal sacrifices are not morally justifiable. While humanism would expect me to take such a position, I think it is impossible to demonstrate, logically and empirically, that the spiritual realm does not exist. As such, the issue of the moral basis of ritual animal sacrifices is difficult to resolve.

It is also noteworthy that those who engage in ritual animal sacrifices genuinely feel morally obligated to do so. For example, if a community felt that its members have sinned, and that their sin has resulted in drought and consequent famine, and that the situation could only be reversed through ritual animal sacrifices, its members would feel morally obligated to engage in such sacrifices. They would be of the view that if they neglected to engage in them, they would be contributing to the perpetuation of the drought, which would eventually lead to the death of many people. Thus, while I myself do not engage in animal sacrifices, I find it difficult to dismiss offhand those who do.

Q: *Is there African animal ethics? If so, could you tell us a bit about it?*

Dr. Oduor: *I am not aware of an academic African animal ethics. My impression is that African philosophers have not viewed animal ethics as high in their order of priorities for philosophical inquiry. However,* the ontological hierarchy that Tempels (1959) and Mbiti (1969) talk about suggests that Africans consider it immoral to kill animals for fun or out of sheer callousness. In fact, many Africans seek to minimize the pain of the animals they kill for food. They even find it difficult to eat meat from an animal which was subjected to prolonged pain in the course of being slaughtered. Furthermore, although indigenous Africans kill and eat animals, they seek to ensure that they do not cause the extinction of any of them. For example, while the Luo, my people, ate birds, they forbade the eating of certain kinds of birds, such as the dove, which seems to breed very slowly. It is also noteworthy that, while the Luo loathed the presence of toads in their houses, they forbade children from killing them by

scaring them that if they killed a toad, their mothers' breasts would fall off. Children were therefore encouraged to simply use a stick or a broom to push a toad out of the house.

Q: *Did colonialism change the attitudes of Africans toward non-human animals?*

Dr. Oduor: Colonialism has resulted in an increasingly secularized African society. As such, the religious beliefs that served as restraints to the mistreatment of animals are quickly disappearing.

Q: *Is caring for animals (e.g., companion animals) a Eurocentric phenomenon, or does it also exist in African culture?*

Dr. Oduor: It is difficult to find an indigenous African who keeps an animal simply for companionship: cows, sheep and goats are kept for their milk and meat, and various domestic birds for their meat and eggs. Dogs are kept for security, not for stroking and playing with. I have heard that the ancient Egyptians were the first people to keep domestic cats, and that they believed that the cats had divine power. They would therefore have kept cats for the benefits they believed to accrue from keeping them, rather than simply as companion animals. In sum, indigenous Africans are keen to care for animals because of the benefits that accrue from keeping them.

Q: *To what extent is masculinity associated with meat eating among Kenya's ethnic groups?*

Dr. Oduor: I do not think masculinity is associated with meat eating in indigenous African cultures in Kenya. Both men and women eat meat in most cultures. However, in certain ethnic groups, women were forbidden to eat certain kinds of meat. For example, among my people, the Luo, women were forbidden to eat chicken and eggs, but were allowed to eat beef and fish. However, with the increasingly cosmopolitan character of contemporary Kenyan society, such prohibitions are quickly disappearing.

Q: *Are you familiar with the modern animal rights literature? Are you familiar with the concept of speciesism and its relation to other "isms" like racism and sexism?*

Dr. Oduor: I am aware of the modern debate on animal rights. However, I am not closely acquainted with the relevant literature. I have heard the term "speciesism" for the first time in this interview; I understand it to denote discrimination on the basis of species, reminiscent of discrimination on the basis of race or sex. For reasons that I gave in my discussion of the belief in a hierarchical universe, I have serious doubts about the meaningfulness of this concept. Besides, anti-speciesism seems to be grounded on the belief in the absolute truth of

neo-Darwinist evolutionism. Yet some academics have vigorously challenged the truth of neo-Darwinist evolutionism (see for examples Andrews 1978; Johnson 1991; Ratzsch 1996).

Q: *Is animal ethics taught at the University of Nairobi?*

Dr. Oduor: There is no course specifically designated “Animal Ethics” at the University of Nairobi. However, the issue of animal ethics arises in courses such as Applied Ethics and Environmental Ethics. In the introductory course on ethics that I sometimes teach, I discuss the issue of rights and responsibilities, and one of the questions that I raise is whether or not animals can properly be said to have rights (see Oduor 2009b).

Q: *In 2007, the first vegan society in Africa was formed in South Africa. Three years later, the Ethiopian Vegan Association was established in the East African country that shares a border with Kenya. In the same year, the association held its first conference in Addis Ababa. The association’s aim is to encourage people to adopt a vegan diet, which it considers the single most important step one can take to reduce the suffering of animals, decrease one’s ecological footprint and to improve and protect one’s health. Are you aware of similar efforts being made in Kenya?*

Dr. Oduor: No, I am not aware of similar efforts in Kenya. I do know that a few religious groups, such as the Hindu and the Seventh Day Adventists, encourage vegetarianism, but I am not aware of any organization specifically formed to advocate for veganism in the country.

Q: *Is there awareness in contemporary African societies about the interrelation between the food animal industry, environmental damage and food insecurity? Do you have any concerns that the damage that factory farming has caused to the environment in more industrialized countries will be repeated in Africa? Is the growth of factory farming perceived as a moral problem in African academia?*

Dr. Oduor: Indigenous African societies did not have mass production of animal products, neither did they strain the environment through capitalistic rapaciousness. However, with the modernization of the economies of these societies, the food animal industry is growing in leaps and bounds. My impression is that most Kenyans are still very impressed by the immediate economic benefits of this industry, and know very little about how it is damaging the environment and threatening food security.

In Kenya, we have large dairy farms, large-scale agriculture by multi-national corporations, and even large-scale fishing. I am aware that factory farming is harmful to the environment. However, I do not hear the academia in Kenya raising concerns about it.

Q: *How do you perceive the relation between neo-liberal policies and globalization foisted upon African countries and human and animal suffering in Africa?*

Dr. Oduor: Neo-liberal policies and globalization are ruining our continent in the social, political and economic spheres. For one, commercial farming is disempowering our farmers, as they are no longer able to grow their own seeds, but have to rely on multi-nationals to sell them seed every planting season. Certain breeds of plants and animals are also being introduced into the country for the short-term benefit of the large corporations with long term devastation of our continent. Moreover, it is very easy for the large-scale farmers to wage price wars against the small scale Kenyan farmers, thereby driving an ever-increasing proportion of the population into dependence on the products of large-scale commercial farming. In all this, the suffering of animals is increased. For example, the breeding of chickens that grow within a short time and are then slaughtered for their meat has grown tremendously in Kenya over the past few decades.

Q: *If our readers are interested in learning more about African philosophy and the status of non-human animals in African thought, are there any recommendations you can make?*

Dr. Oduor: With regard to African philosophy, several entries in my list of references should be helpful. As for the status of non-human animals in African thought, I am not aware of any literature apart from Tempels (1959) and Mbiti (1969).

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Biography

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