

14. From the Local to the Universal: Henry Odera Oruka's Vision of a Just World as Stimulus for an Intercultural Theological Ethics

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Henry Odera Oruka as Pioneer of Modern African Philosophy

Born in Kenya in 1944, Henry Odera Oruka is an important pioneer of modern African philosophy.¹ He studied philosophy in Kenya, Sweden, and the United States. He began teaching at the University of Nairobi in 1970. At the beginning of his teaching assignment, he was confronted with many prejudices. His fellow professors, most of whom were priests and lay theologians, devalued African societies. Some regarded logical thinking as a special privilege of the West, as an Anglican British missionary suggested: "I do not think that logic is really a subject for the African mind. We in the West are familiar with it right from the days of Aristotle. The African mind, I believe, is intuitive, not logical."²

His philosophy of wisdom emerged as a reaction to these prejudices. He discovered and localized traditional African wisdom teachings as a philosophy, one that could challenge the claim, which he regarded as part of the racist-colonial tradition, that African systems of thought are closed, exclusively communal, and radically different from Western rational thinking, as Anke Graneß, who has studied his work in detail, points out.³

¹ This chapter is based on a master's thesis, which was written in the context of a different question. Maria Haneder-Kulterer, "Gerechtigkeit für die ganze Welt? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit dem Prinzip des Human Minimum und der Parental Earth Ethics von Henry Odera Oruka" (MA Thesis, University of Vienna, 2023).

² Henry Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on an African Philosophy* (Brill, 1990), 3.

³ Anke Graneß, *Das menschliche Minimum: Globale Gerechtigkeit aus afrikanischer Sicht: Henry Odera Oruka* (Campus, 2011), 73.

In addition to Anke Graneß, Jonathan O. Chimakonam, Jacinta Mwendu Maweu, Michael Kamau Mburu and Oriare Nyarwath should also be mentioned here, who have dealt with Odera Orika and his work in recent years, particularly from an African perspective.⁴

For Odera Orika, the wisdom dimension of philosophy manifests itself in the ethical commitment of philosophers. He is convinced that philosophy and ethics should not simply be pursued as unrealistic sciences at universities but must be practical and contribute to the improvement of human life, to the transformation of societies, and to greater justice. "Philosophy is an art of reasoning and provides a critical intellectual weapon and methodology for analysing and synthesising the basic problems of man, society and nature. . . . The main function of moral and social philosophy is to apply rigorous analytic and synthetic reason to the basic moral and social problems and help explain or define moral good, moral evil and the requirements of humanist social order."⁵

The big questions of ethics, "What is a good life?" and "What should I do?" become a central theme in his research into his socially and politically marginalized African continent. Injustice must be reflected upon and morally evaluated, and new ideas to secure justice for all must be developed. He sees Africa's problems in a wider context, in the context of the entire world, and solutions must be found in dialogue on a global level. He advocates for an intercultural ethics, a dialogue between different ethical approaches, drawing on African wisdom philosophy and

⁴ Jonathan O. Chimakonam, "Is the Debate on Poverty Research a Global One? A Consideration of the Exclusion of Odera Orika's 'Human Minimum' as a Case of Epistemic Injustice," in *Dimensions of Poverty: Measurement, Epistemic Injustices, Activism*, ed. V. Beck (Springer Nature, 2020), 97–114; Jacinta Mwendu Maweu, "The Relevance of Odera Orika's Parental Earth Ethics as an Eco Philosophy," in *Odera Orika in the Twenty-first Century: Kenyan Philosophical Studies*, II, ed. R. M. J. Oduor, O. Nyarwath, and F. E. A. Owakah (The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), 303–313; Michael Kamau Mburu, *Odera Orika and the Right to a Human Minimum: An African Philosopher's Defense of Human Dignity and Environment* (Lexington Books, 2022); Oriare Nyarwath, "Oruka's Right to a Human Minimum as a Principle of Global Justice," in *Odera Orika in the Twenty-first Century*, 261–285.

⁵ Henry Odera Orika, *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum* (East African Education Publishers, 1997), 74.

indigenous knowledge from all cultures, as well as from Western philosophical models of thought.⁶

Based on his fundamental question of justice, which he understood as global justice, he developed two important ethical models, the idea of a “Human Minimum” and the “Parental Earth Ethics,” which still have much to say about the problems of the world today, and which can serve as a valuable impetus for intercultural theological ethics.

He therefore repeatedly addressed the political situation in Kenya in his writings and acted as a critic of the Kenyan regime. For this reason, he was also placed under house arrest and banned from publishing. All too soon, in December 1995, he died in a road accident in which he was run over by a lorry. The suspicion that a thinker critical of the regime had been disposed of could never be completely dispelled.⁷

This contribution focuses on Odera Oruka’s ethical models and his engagement with global justice, as well as the extent to which his ideas can provide valuable insights for intercultural theological ethics.

Odera Oruka’s Emphasis on Global Justice

Henry Odera Oruka is a pioneer in thinking about global justice. For him, justice is an ethical aspiration that transcends national borders. At the beginning, he advocates a radical approach to “socio-economic distributive justice,” which makes a morally normative claim. In this phase, he is convinced that global justice must be geared towards overcoming all injustices and that all resources and wealth in the world must be distributed equally to the entire world population.⁸ Global justice “requires equal distribution of the world’s wealth among its population, regardless of the national, racial, technological or geographical differences. It requires total eradication of inequality in the world.”⁹

⁶ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 98–100.

⁷ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 71.

⁸ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 104.

⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 118.

Later he moves away from the idea of a fundamentally equal distribution of all resources and only calls for a “human minimum” to ensure a basic standard of living for all. He understands global justice as an ethically regulative principle that is valid for all people, no matter their nationality, and “that would form a base for an ethics that can help *ensure the practice of global justice* among the inhabitants of the globe regardless of the question of racial, national or geographical origins and political affiliations.”¹⁰ This principle is linked to demands, which he outlines as follows:

We need a principle which would make it *ethically obligatory* for affluent nations to aid poor ones as an unqualified moral duty for humanity, and for the latter to receive such aid without feeling a sense of *self-pity*. Such a principle should also help to invalidate the use of “national supererogation” in the relations between nations without thereby discrediting the principle of national sovereignty and the equality of nations. It should also be a principle from which any nation (however independent) that treats its citizens as “subhumans” would legitimately call for *humane* external interference in her internal affairs.¹¹

This thesis by Odera Orika could be seen as an interesting new way of thinking about humanitarian aid, as it was already discussed in the colonial debates of the sixteenth century as an ethics of humanitarian intervention. Later in this chapter, this topic will be discussed again with reference to Hans Schelkshorn, particularly in connection with key aspects of intercultural theological ethics.¹²

Oriare Nyarwath notes, in his analysis of Odera Orika, that his argument for a human minimum is focused on the fulfilment of global justice, which calls for normative principles that oblige rich nations and

¹⁰ Odera Orika, *Practical Philosophy*, 84, italics original.

¹¹ Odera Orika, *Practical Philosophy*, 84, quotation marks and italics original.

¹² Hans Schelkshorn, *Rethinking European Modernity: Reason, Power, and Coloniality in Early Modern Thought* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 139–213.

individuals to care for the poor or disadvantaged.¹³ In short, all nations have “a global ethical obligation to humanity,”¹⁴ to help the poor in order to safeguard the rights and existence of individuals and entire states. This is regarded as a fundamental global obligation that must be demanded of states. It is not to be understood as historical reparations or international charity. Global justice is therefore a universally valid principle that makes it possible to access national wealth in favor of the world’s poor.¹⁵ To make this possible, he calls for all people to have a minimum level of security for the basic necessities of life, which he calls the “right to a human minimum.”¹⁶

The Right to a Human Minimum

Odera Oruka understands the human minimum as a basic right to an absolutely necessary subsistence minimum, which is a prerequisite for every person in the world to be able to live rationally and self-confidently. This fundamental right is only guaranteed, if it aims to secure specific basic needs enabling people to shape their lives creatively and act morally.

For all human beings to function with a significant degree of rationality and self-awareness, they need a certain minimum amount of physical security, health care, and subsistence . . . Below this minimum one may still be human and alive. But one cannot successfully carry out the functions of a moral agent or engage in creative activity. Access to at least the human minimum is necessary (even if not sufficient) for one to be rational and self-conscious. Without it, man is either a brute or a human vegetable; he loses the very minimum necessary for a decent definition of human being.¹⁷

¹³ Nyarwath, *Human Minimum as a Principle of Global Justice*, 264.

¹⁴ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 85.

¹⁵ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 106.

¹⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 87.

¹⁷ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 87.

Odera Oruka sees these three basic rights—physical security, health care, and subsistence—as universal human rights because they are necessary to guarantee human life throughout the world and are not limited to a particular state. He refers to these three rights as “the inherent rights of persons,” which, as Mburu explains,¹⁸ means that their justification derives from human nature itself. This means a universal moral right, which is complemented by the obligation of every moral agent to ensure that the right to a human minimum is respected.¹⁹

There are conceptual ambiguities in connection with these three basic rights. At the beginning of his idea of the Human Minimum, in 1989, in the article “The Philosophy of Foreign Aid,”²⁰ in connection with the above-mentioned physical security, health care, and subsistence he speaks of three basic rights.²¹ Two years later, when he explains these in more detail in his essay “The Philosophy of Liberty”²² he speaks of the three basic (or primary) needs and develops them more precisely by distinguishing them from secondary or non-primary needs and by connecting them with freedom. The *primary needs*—those already mentioned above as basic rights, namely physical security, health care, and subsistence—are vital basic needs. In an expanded definition of basic needs, he describes more precisely what he means by subsistence. A subsistence level must ensure access to food, shelter, and clothing, as well as basic knowledge, the ability to move and act, and the practice of sexuality, which he considers a biological necessity for reproduction. He views reproduction as the foundation for the survival of a society and thus as something that must be guaranteed. In addition, he identifies the two further basic needs: health—which, in this more detailed definition, is also considered part of

¹⁸ Mburu, *Odera Oruka and the Human Minimum*, 71.

¹⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 85–86.

²⁰ Henry Odera Oruka, “Philosophy of Foreign Aid,” in *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam*, ed. A. Graneß and K. Kresse (Peter Lang, 1997), 81–92.

²¹ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Foreign Aid*, 85.

²² Henry Odera Oruka, *The Philosophy of Liberty: An Essay on Political Philosophy* (Standard Textbooks Graphics and Publishing, 1991).

subsistence—and physical security, which he defines as the fundamental inviolability of human life.²³

The *secondary needs* serve further development and are not vital. What counts as a vital basic need and what counts as a secondary need varies depending on the context. Relevant for determining the difference are, for example, cultural circumstances or climatic conditions.²⁴ Secondary needs, which are common to all, include the ability to express oneself, to socialize with others, to have one's own opinion, to belong to a religion or no religion, to strive for culture and education, as well as sexual activity for pleasure. The fulfilment of basic needs always takes precedence over the fulfilment of secondary needs.²⁵

The right to a human minimum, the right to have the basic needs described above met, is an absolute right. It is a basic prerequisite for the fulfilment of all other rights. “[T]here is morally no other right of persons which can justifiably compromise its enforcement. Its fulfilment is the basic starting point for the exercise . . . of any other right. . . . [It] is the basis for a justified demand by anybody that the world (not just his society) has the duty to ensure that he is not denied a chance to live a basically healthy life.”²⁶

With the demand for a human minimum, he wants to realize the principle of global justice. This is an important basic principle for global ethics, because only when the human minimum is secured, and when people are free from existential fears, can they participate in moral discourse, according to Odera Oruka.

Mburu points out that Odera Oruka's idea of global justice can only be realized if we humans embrace an ethic that understands the whole universe as a commonwealth, as Odera Oruka later expresses in his model of Parental Earth Ethics: “The earth is a common good for all.” With the

²³ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Liberty*, 53–54; Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 128.

²⁴ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Liberty*, 53–54.

²⁵ Odera Oruka, *Philosophy of Liberty*, 64–65.

²⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 88.

right to a human minimum, everyone should have the same right to basic supply.²⁷

Henry Odera Oruka makes a universal claim in his ethics. At its core, Odera Oruka offers a global ethic that aims beyond the goal of human well-being to the preservation of the earth.²⁸ This claim is reinforced in his second ethical model, Parental Earth Ethics, with which he focuses on the preservation of the whole world and shows how poverty reduction, environmental protection, climate protection, and security policy are interlinked.

Parental Earth Ethics

Henry Odera Oruka first used the term “Parental Earth Ethics” in 1993 as the title of an essay²⁹ in which he analyzed Garrett Hardin’s “Lifeboat Ethics”—the “boat is full” idea. Hardin is of the opinion that the earth can no longer support population growth and therefore rejects famine aid from rich countries to poor countries. With the image of a full boat and millions of poor people floating next to it, he illustrates his claim that famine aid causes the population in poor countries to increase exponentially, often even in direct proportion to this aid, while rich countries endeavor to control their population growth.

Invoking his idea of a right to a human minimum, Odera Oruka develops a counterposition to Hardin’s theory. “The right to a human minimum does by definition impose a duty on every moral agent (no matter from what part of the globe) to help ensure that there are no human beings who lack the means to fulfil this right.”³⁰ The problem with Hardin’s theory is that he assumes there is only one boat and that there is no connection between the rich people in the boat and the poor people

²⁷ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150; Mburu, *Odera Oruka and the Human Minimum*, 89.

²⁸ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 137.

²⁹ The title of the essay is “Parental Earth Ethics” and is quoted in Odera Oruka’s *Practical Philosophy*, 146–151.

³⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 147.

floating around it. Odera Oruka challenges this and transforms the image of a single boat into several—some wealthy and many poor. The wealthy boats are closely linked to the poor boats, because rich countries have achieved a large part of their wealth at the expense of poor countries. If one boat sinks, it is highly likely that all the others will sink too. “If indeed all the poor boats sank, eventually the rich boats would also sink.”³¹

He moves on from the image of the boats to the image of a family, through which he attempts to depict the global dependency relationships even more clearly and to show how strongly everything in the world is interconnected: “I make the claim that the earth, or the world, is a kind of family unit in which the members have a kith and kin relationship with one another and the earth is a common wealth to all humanity.”³² However, people are not only connected with one another but are also dependent on all of nature—animals, plants, the earth as an ecosystem, and the entire cosmos—and nature is likewise dependent on people. “For human existence, the existence of all other members of the ecosystem (even microbes) is necessary, hence the great need for maintaining biodiversity and preservation of the environment.”³³

As humans could not exist without the diversity of nature and all other members of the ecosystem, Odera Oruka is looking for an ecophilosophical approach that recognizes the overall interrelationships of nature. At the center of his ecophilosophy is the “complex web of being,” the whole of nature, wherein everything living is part of a single network that is no longer anthropocentrically oriented.³⁴

He criticizes anthropocentric attitudes in philosophy and in religions, highlighting Christianity in particular as “the most anthropocentric religion of all.”³⁵ Philosophical ethicists in search of an environmental ethic have

³¹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 147–148.

³² Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150.

³³ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 250.

³⁴ Henry Odera Oruka, “Ecophilosophy and the Parental Earth Ethics: On the Complex Web of Being,” in *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam*, ed. A. Graneß and K. Kresse (Peter Lang, 1997), 119.

³⁵ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 245.

found no support in Christianity, he notes. Biblical texts that place human beings at the center as the master of all nature are referenced by him, with the creation mandate in Genesis 1:28 cited as an example. For this reason, he states, ethicists have begun to look for ethical foundations in different traditions and cultures, in order to develop a holistic approach to environmental ethics that includes all living beings and nature as a whole.³⁶

He builds on the criticism of Christianity that has been emerging since the 1960s, according to which the biblical mandate to rule (Genesis 1:28) and the concept of human beings created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) promote an anthropocentric view that ignores nature and is said to have contributed significantly to the ecological crisis. From today's perspective, Odera Oruka's position can be contrasted with the fact that Christianity is generally characterized by a moderate anthropocentrism, which does not understand human beings in the status of superiority and domination, but which sees them in their unique dignity with the responsibility to care for all people and the whole of creation.³⁷ Moreover, Pope Francis's environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'* contains numerous passages that refer to ecophilosophical approaches. This chapter will discuss this topic in more detail later.

Odera Oruka argues in favor of a holistic environmental ethic, according to which humans are one member of the universe among many and every being has a value in itself unconnected to any benefit it may confer on humanity. "We have one ethics, one morality for all the inhabitants of the globe, plus the globe itself. So, an action or a thing is ethically right when it tends to preserve the integrity, beauty and stability of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends to do otherwise."³⁸

This is his concern with the Parental Earth Ethics, in which he elaborates on his ecophilosophical approach. Using the metaphor of a family with six

³⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 245.

³⁷ Richard N. Rwiza, *Environmental Ethics in the African Context* (CUEA Press, 2021), 106; Markus Vogt, *Christliche Umweltethik. Grundlagen und zentrale Herausforderungen* (Herder 2021), 52–54.

³⁸ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 244.

children, he explains the interdependence in our world. “Two of the children are relatively rich and four generally poor. . . . The reason for the differences in wealth have to do partly with the family history, partly with personal luck, and partly with individual talents.”³⁹ In addition to these personal differences, all children also have something in common. The most fundamental thing they have in common is their common origin—i.e., their parents. “The other factor they have in common is that each of them has his or her status and achievement based upon the tutelage that the family as a whole provided. Some made better use of that tutelage, while others may have squandered it.”⁴⁰

The family has always been governed by unwritten ethical laws, on which individual relationships with the family are based, and which can be summarized by two principles: 1) the parental debt (or bound) principle (PP), and 2) the individual luck principle (IP).⁴¹ The first principle involves kinship debt and the obligation to contribute to the well-being of all. Fortune and misfortune are closely linked to family history. This principle is based on four interrelated rules:

- 1a) *The Family Security Rule* ensures that every family member can always ask for support when they need it.
- 1b) *The Kinshipshame Rule*⁴² stipulates that the living conditions of each family member have an influence (both materially and emotionally) on all the others.
- 1c) *The Parental Debt Rule* emphasizes that no one is solely responsible for their wealth or poverty, because this is at least partly related to family history.

³⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴¹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴² “*The Kinshipshame Rule*, which states that the life conditions of any one member of the family affects all of them, both materially and emotionally, so that none of the members can reasonably be proud of his situation, however ‘happy,’ if any member of the family tree lives in decadence.” Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 149, emphasis original.

- 1d) *Individual and Family Survival* obliges every member of the family to follow the first three rules and allows them to interfere with a member's property if they ignore the rules.⁴³

The second principle emphasizes individual happiness and ensures that each person has individual freedom of choice over their life and possessions. It regulates the possibility of personal enrichment (*The Personal Achievement Rule*), the free decision about personal property (*The Personal Supererogation Rule*), and subjects everyone to a public family law (*The Public Law Rule*).⁴⁴

If the rules of both principles conflict with each other, then the "Parental Debt Principle" always takes precedence over the "Individual Luck Principle," because the pursuit of individual happiness and prosperity is always subordinate to the state of the family unit and personal wealth is only partially at one's private disposal.⁴⁵ "The fate and security (physical or welfare) of each member of a family is ultimately bound up with the existential reality of the family as a whole."⁴⁶

According to Odera Oruka, these principles apply to the world, and the world, in which all inhabitants are related to each other, is best captured by the metaphor of the family. On this model, Planet Earth itself is to be seen as a common good for all people. That is the basic principle for everything.⁴⁷ Odera Oruka's aim is to adopt the principles of Parental Earth Ethics for a global ethic. He proposes that all rich and powerful nations pay into a pool that benefits the rest of the world. He calls this a "parental earth insurance policy," a kind of insurance for the earth.⁴⁸ He calls for laws to limit overconsumption and to ensure the survival of underconsumers: "Nations and international organizations should make laws to help limit the overconsumption of this proportion of mankind and

⁴³ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148–149; Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 142.

⁴⁴ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 149.

⁴⁵ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 143.

⁴⁶ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 148.

⁴⁷ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150.

⁴⁸ Odera Oruka, "Ecophilosophy," 129.

to enhance the chances of the hungry one-third of the population (the underconsumers) of obtaining adequate food and water. . . . We need to protect consumers against the dictates of the producer and supplier. We also need to protect the excessive consumer against the pseudo-demands of his/her own appetite.”⁴⁹

In short, Odera Oruka advances an ethic of moderation and modesty, and Parental Earth Ethics represents this type of ethics. It is a basic ethic that can create the foundations for a just world.⁵⁰ It is an environmental ethic, in the sense that it aims for global environmental protection, and it is a social ethic, in the sense that it advocates for a global redistribution of wealth. And as consumer ethics, it can be an ethical framework “to help ensure a moral duty of both the superconsumers and underconsumers in a united world order.”⁵¹ In a “complex web of being,” as Odera Oruka understands it, ecological thinking, consumer behavior, and social theories are closely interwoven and cannot be separated from one another.⁵²

Values for All: Human Minimum and Parental Earth Ethics as Pathways to Global Justice

With Parental Earth Ethics, Odera Oruka develops the idea of the human minimum further and supplements his arguments in favor of it. His aim is to provide a convincing justification for why the rich are obliged to help the poor. The “parental debt (bound) principle” (i.e., the principle of kinship debt) is intended to oblige people to take mutual responsibility for the well-being of all. According to this principle, it is possible for the disadvantaged to demand support and help from the wealthy if their own survival, or that of the group, is at risk. With the “individual and family survival rule,” the fourth rule of the “parental debt principle,” he ensures that the industrious have the opportunity to acquire resources that idle

⁴⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 265.

⁵⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 150.

⁵¹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 266.

⁵² Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 144.

relatives overlook. This appropriation is morally justified if it serves the common good and does not contribute to an excessive personal enrichment of individuals, which he explains through the second principle of individual luck. However, if concerns for the common good collide with demands for personal happiness or property, the common good takes precedence over personal happiness.⁵³ The right to a human minimum cannot be overridden by a right to property, as Oriare Nyarwath observes: "For him [Odera Oruka], the right to property ought not to be treated as giving one an exclusive right over the resources in one's possession."⁵⁴ There is no absolute and exclusive right to personal property. The right to a human minimum must be fulfilled for all people before personal property rights are recognized.

With these two ethical models, Odera Oruka represents an ethic that—as Anke Graneß also interprets it—lays claim to universal validity. He is concerned with the preservation of the world: the entirety of existence is closely interlinked and manifests itself concretely in the individual areas of poverty reduction and environmental policy.⁵⁵ The fight against poverty, which is his primary concern in developing his account of the human minimum, is in addition closely linked to security policy, which is not possible independently of the other fields. As a basic ethic, Parental Earth Ethics integrates ecological thinking and a commitment to social justice into a single unit and thus makes a claim that must be considered and discussed globally. His ethics can only be realized within the global community; it is a global ethic. The overarching theme of his reflections is encapsulated in his Parental Earth Ethics, which frames all political and economic issues in Africa, and which motivates his tireless commitment to justice "within the context of a whole world" conceived of as a "complex web of being." Central to his thinking is the interconnectedness of

⁵³ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 149.

⁵⁴ Nyarwath, "Oruka's Right to a Human Minimum," 276.

⁵⁵ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 116.

everything on Earth.⁵⁶ It is not possible to separate the local from the global.

Impulses for Intercultural Theological Ethics

The previous discussions have shown that a key concern for Odera Oruka is to promote greater justice on a global level, which necessitates an intercultural and international exchange of ideas. Crossing cultural horizons is essential for this endeavor to succeed. Therefore, this chapter will now address the question of what principles can be derived from Odera Oruka's ethical models for an intercultural theological ethics. The following guidelines aim to provide possible conversation and discussion points for further thinking about intercultural issues.

Appreciation and Recognition of Local Traditions and Values, and Bringing Them into a Global Dialogue with One Another

Odera Oruka expresses this appreciation by examining and validating traditional African wisdom teachings—passed down through oral traditions—as philosophical doctrines that are of equal value to written philosophical schools of thought. He advocates for an intercultural ethics characterized by appreciation, recognition, and dialogue among different ethical perspectives. This includes African wisdom philosophy and indigenous knowledge from all cultures, as well as Western philosophical models.⁵⁷

For Jacinta Mwende Maweu, a Kenyan philosopher, this remains equally relevant today. In the context of global climate change, she argues that efforts must be made to integrate and anchor indigenous knowledge within the “global village” to dismantle the notion that Western-oriented

⁵⁶ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 137.

⁵⁷ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 98–100.

knowledge systems are the only valid approach to the global environmental crisis.⁵⁸

The lesson that can be drawn from this approach to intercultural theological ethics is that we should appreciate, attend to, and be open towards all cultural, religious, and indigenous local traditions around the world, regardless of whether they are transmitted orally or in writing, or whether they are taught at universities or lived and experienced by people in their daily lives. This approach requires an attitude of listening and learning, as well as engaging others as equal and enriching dialogue partners on a global level, in order to collectively discuss valuable ethical questions and gain insights.

From a theological and ethical perspective, there are interesting points of reference in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, where he writes that

it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They . . . should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. (no. 146)

The Living Conditions of People as a Starting Point

For Odera Oruka, philosophical inquiry and ethical reflection always begin with individual people and their living conditions. The foundation of all his thinking lies in the problems of his continent and the peoples who live there. Ethics must engage with the "urgent questions of the present"⁵⁹ everywhere in the world. He believes that mere abstract philosophizing in the ivory towers of universities lacks legitimacy and relevance. In his

⁵⁸ Jacinta Mwende Maweu, "Gleichheit, Differenz und Komplementarität afrikanischer und westlicher Philosophie," in *Polylog denken: Überlegungen zu einer interkulturell-philosophischen Minimalregel*, ed. F. Gmainer-Pranzl and B. Saal (Facultas, 2018), 284.

⁵⁹ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 352.

engagement with traditional wisdom teachings, he discovers that this wise dimension of philosophy manifests itself in the ethical commitment of philosophers. As a practical philosophy, ethics must confront lived realities, injustices, and consequences, seeking values and principles on a moral level and applying them in specific social and political contexts to improve living conditions. He describes the goal as transforming society toward greater justice in the world.⁶⁰

One motivation for intercultural ethics could be to engage with concrete living conditions, as well as current global challenges such as climate change and social justice, to develop pragmatic solutions. Ethics should be practically applicable in daily life—the responsibility of the individual and the community is central to theological ethics, particularly with regard to the commitment to social justice and the principle of neighborly love. Here too, *Laudato Si'* could be used as a dialog partner, which Markus Vogt describes as a source of inspiration for the church as a change agent.⁶¹

Global Justice as a Universally Valid Ethical Principle

Reflecting on and seeking justice is the central concern of Odera Oruka's thought. By highlighting the profound interconnections in the world and the shared responsibility that everyone has for realizing justice, he argues that justice can only be conceived on a global scale. For Odera Oruka, global justice is an ethical principle that transcends national regulations and imposes a moral obligation on all individuals and states to assist others. It is a universally valid ethical principle that aims to ensure access to national wealth for the benefit of the poor across the world. The principle of global justice imposes an unconditional duty to assist and affirms an absolute right for those in need of receiving help.⁶²

⁶⁰ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 74.

⁶¹ Vogt, *Christliche Umweltethik*, 260.

⁶² Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 82.

A fundamental question for intercultural theological ethics is what this radical demand amounts to, and how the absolute right of individuals to receive help can be practically realized in different contexts. Understanding global justice as a universally valid ethical principle could provide an important foundation for actively focusing on a more just world, as well as raising awareness of global injustices—recognizing and acknowledging them and reflecting on their interconnections and potential solutions.

As noted earlier, Odera Orika's thought can be understood as a different variant of humanitarian aid, as discussed within the theological tradition in the sixteenth century. Based on Hans Schelkshorn's investigations, Francisco de Vitoria should be mentioned here, who was an important representative of the just war theory and who laid the foundation for a modern, global cosmopolitanism in his *Relectiones de Indis* at the beginning of the modern era. Vitoria significantly contributed to the development of international law with his conception of the law of nations. He expands the horizon of moral responsibility to encompass all of humanity, from which the idea of humanitarian intervention to save the innocent arises. Vitoria's vision is of a global society based on partnership and communication that connects individuals. His thinking relates to an inter-state order based on international law and a cosmopolitan ethics that transcends the boundaries of state sovereignty.⁶³

The principle of the common good in *Laudato Si'* should also be highlighted here as a point of reference to Odera Orika's thesis from a theological perspective. For Pope Francis the principle of the common good is based on respect for human dignity and inalienable rights, promoting integral development. It encompasses societal welfare, the role of intermediate groups—especially the family—and the principle of subsidiarity. Additionally, it requires social peace, stability, and distributive justice. Both society as a whole and the state in particular have a duty to uphold and promote the common good. For Pope Francis, the principle

⁶³ Schelkshorn, *Rethinking European Modernity*, 207–208.

of the common good must be transformed directly into an appeal for solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest, which means drawing the consequences from the common destination of the earth's goods. In the option for the poorest, he sees a fundamental ethical requirement for an effective realization of the common good (*Laudato Si'*, nos. 156–158).

The Right to a Human Minimum as an Absolute Right for All

The right to a human minimum is deeply connected to the principle of global justice. Such a minimum ensures the basic needs of individuals for self-preservation and serves as the foundation for their capacity to act freely and morally as rational and self-aware beings. This right allows for and justifies access to national and even private property in cases where it concerns the survival of others, as it is an absolute right that takes precedence over property rights.

With this concept, Henry Odera Orika advocates for an egalitarian, distributive ethics. It is egalitarian because the right to basic provision is afforded to every person equally, and it is distributive because he views the unequal distribution of goods as a primary problem that needs to be addressed through redistribution.⁶⁴

How this existence minimum could be conceived and implemented on a global scale remains largely open in Odera Orika's work. This should serve as an impetus for intercultural theological ethics to further engage with the concept of the human minimum—for example, by exploring the idea that this is an absolute right that belongs to all people everywhere, which to the right to property is subordinate, and examining how it can be addressed in different situations and contexts. This approach could be brought into dialogue with other perspectives and traditions to expand on it and discuss potential solutions for the major problems of our time—such as poverty, hunger, war, and the climate crisis.

⁶⁴ Graneß, *Menschliches Minimum*, 114.

With his discussion on the human minimum, Odera Oruka addresses themes that also have a place in the theological-ethical tradition. A point of reference from a theological perspective can be found in Thomas Aquinas, who, in the context of the discussion on virtues associated with justice, distinguishes between a legal and a moral debt or duty (*debitum*), as described by Stephen Theron.⁶⁵

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas presents a table of inclinations, which are often interpreted as stemming from a fundamental tendency toward individual self-preservation. These inclinations include those toward “sexual intercourse and founding a family, to what is most specific to man, viz. the intellectual tendencies to such things as knowing the truth about God and living in society.”⁶⁶ An intercultural theological ethics could strive to create a framework for examining the relationship between Thomas Aquinas’s concept of natural inclinations and Henry Odera Oruka’s hierarchy of basic and secondary needs. This exploration aims to investigate the extent to which these two philosophical frameworks share connections in their understanding of essential human needs and ethical considerations.

Parental Earth Ethics as a Basis for a Holistic Environmental and Social Ethics

Parental Earth Ethics is an ecocentric, holistic environmental ethics that views humans as one among many members of the universe, with each being possessing intrinsic value independent of its utility to humans. As a foundational ethics, it links the fight against poverty and the fair distribution of the Earth’s resources with environmental considerations. The principles of Parental Earth Ethics are, on the one hand, crucial for establishing a human minimum for all people, and on the other hand, they can guide an ecophilosophical approach to addressing the current global

⁶⁵ Stephen Theron, *Thomas Aquinas on Virtue and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 91.

⁶⁶ Theron, *Thomas Aquinas*, 105.

environmental crisis. The “parental debt principle” describes a relationship of dependency among all members of this planet, which includes all of nature.

Maweu interprets the Parental Earth Principle today as asserting that the security of all on this planet and the obligation to address environmental issues take precedence over the selfish pursuit of human progress at the expense of other members of this Earth, whether they are human or another part of nature.⁶⁷

A central aim of this model for intercultural theological ethics is to embrace Odera Oruka’s view of the world as a “complex web of being.” This means moving away from a selfish, anthropocentric way of thinking, as Odera Oruka sees it promoted by Christianity in particular, based on the creation mandate—which was interpreted as a mandate to rule—and developing a holistic view that acknowledges the comprehensive interconnections of all existence. Markus Vogt notes that a critical rethinking of the ethics of creation in the light of the ecological crisis is only just beginning and, from the perspective of a Christian ethics of creation, he proposes an anthroporelational approach in which humans, as subjects of responsibility, recognize the intrinsic value of animals, plants and ecosystems.⁶⁸

In his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis also criticizes a great anthropological lack of moderation in the modern age and points out that an “inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world” and argues in favor of understanding people as responsible stewards of the universe. And like Odera Oruka with his idea of the universe as a “complex web of being,” Pope Francis writes “everything is connected,” by which he means that everything—human beings, nature, the universe—is interrelated. Pope Francis also agrees with Odera Oruka in saying that we can only heal our relationship with nature if we also heal

⁶⁷ Maweu, “The Relevance of Odera Oruka’s Parental Earth Ethics,” 311–312.

⁶⁸ Vogt, *Christliche Umweltethik*, 53–54, 187.

all fundamental human relationships. He points out that the appreciation of nature and the environment is inseparable from the appreciation of every human person. Thus, hearing the cries of nature is closely linked to recognizing the value of a poor person, for example. Social responsibility and ecological thinking are closely linked (*Laudato Si'*, nos. 116–124). He is convinced that “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 49). This connects him to Odera Oruka's thesis, that social issues and the environmental crisis are closely intertwined, and that a solution to one cannot be achieved without addressing the other.

Moral Universality

Moral universality implies that intercultural dialogue must strive for commonalities and convergence—at the level of legal and moral rights and at the level of moral principles and values. The three fundamental rights—physical safety, healthcare, and subsistence—that Oruka uses to describe the human minimum are understood by him as universal human rights, as they are considered absolute necessities for the survival of individuals everywhere in the world. They are essential for the functioning of a person. Since these basic rights are regarded as universal, every morally capable individual has an obligation to ensure that the right to a minimum is upheld.⁶⁹

Odera Oruka advocates universal ethical principles that must transcend cultural boundaries. An intercultural theological ethics should engage with these three fundamental, universal rights, exploring their precise definitions, assessing their universality, and identifying additional shared values that should serve as a foundation for a more just world. In this regard, Odera Oruka's thought provides a valuable stimulus for diverse ethical approaches.

⁶⁹ Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy*, 85–87.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned ideas and suggestions should be used to engage in an intercultural dialogue with Odera Oruka's ethics, though they do not claim to be exhaustive. They are intended to encourage intercultural theological ethics to engage with this exceptional philosopher, who thought globally and interculturally from the early 1980s until his death in 1995. His ethical models—the human minimum and Parental Earth Ethics—particularly emphasize global justice, and therefore universal claims of ethics. Starting from the challenges of his marginalized continent, he developed a universal vision and situates African philosophy at eye-level with Western traditions. His ideas remain remarkably relevant today, more than thirty years later. A deeper exploration of his work from this perspective would be desirable and could yield valuable insights.



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