

African Culture and Personality: A Reply to D. A. Masolo

JAMES E. LASSITER

I read with great interest Professor D. A. Masolo's response to my article on African culture and personality (see Masolo 1999 and Lassiter 1999).¹ I fully welcome comment and criticism on the issues raised in my paper and am happy that scholars such as Masolo are responding.

I believe that the issues raised in my paper are very important for the future of African studies and culture and personality inquiry in the social sciences. Therefore, given the nature of Masolo's comments, I believe a full and detailed reply is called for. Let me begin by briefly summarizing my paper's main themes which were unfortunately either misrepresented or ignored by Masolo:

African scholars outside the social sciences continue to identify and analyze what they believe are broad psychological and cultural patterns and processes in sub-Saharan Africa. They do so despite the lack of interest in or support for such lines of scholarly inquiry within the social sciences.

Although the African scholars' use of social science terminology and concepts is sometimes questionable and their opinions and propositions are not always tied to historical and ethnographic data, most of their insights and arguments are well reasoned and compelling.

As such, the African scholars' insights and arguments cited should be studied by African and non-African social scientists. Social scientists should support and join non-social scientist African scholars in pursuit of the broader psychological and cultural patterns and processes in Africa. They should conduct investigations to see if assertions such as those I cite are supported by the historical and ethnographic record, and conduct new research on the continent to test such claims and develop new areas of inquiry.

It is hoped that social scientists and non-social scientists, Africans and non-Africans, will make significant contributions to the identification and elimination of recurring psychological and cultural patterns and processes that form barriers to community, national, and regional development in Africa.

Having studied in detail Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (1995), I was surprised by the sketchy and defensive note Masolo submitted as a comment on my paper. I fully expected a philosopher with his experience and academic stature to fully address the key issues raised in my paper. Regrettably, he chose to comment on the paper cursorily, declared it an attack on African scholarship, misunderstood and misrepresented my writing, and ignored

James E Lassiter is currently a Senior Refugee Program Manager in the U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Office of International Affairs in Washington, D.C. He was trained in anthropology and African Studies at the University of Oregon (M.S., 1975; Ph.D., 1983) and has published in his area of expertise. In addition to conducting anthropological research in Swaziland from 1980-83, he served as a Peace Corps administrator in Tanzania and Ghana and as a Senior Desk Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.

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the key issues and my suggestions for further research along the lines suggested by the African scholars I survey. Suffice it to say, the significance of my paper has little or nothing to do with me, as Masolo's title tries to indicate. My paper's value derives from the purported patterns and processes of African psychological and cultural adaptation it reveals, and its recommendation that scholars from *all* relevant disciplines address these subjects for the sake of furthering knowledge and finding solutions to Africa's problems.

My main objective in this reply is to *refocus* attention on the crucial issues the African scholars persuasively raise, and the implication these issues have for Africa and ethnology. I will do so by addressing the major misunderstandings and misrepresentations of my paper as found in Masolo's critique.

First, Masolo claims I argue that the "pollution of the social sciences in African studies is occurring mainly as a result of the freelance attitude and practice (of) African scholars". Further, he asserts that I believe African scholars' writing on social science topics are "devastating to the integrity and growth of a tradition of scientific and respectable African social studies". The "old ethnology" of culture and personality died for good reason in the 1970s not at the hands of African scholars; rather it succumbed from its abandonment by social scientists themselves. Currently, other than ongoing studies of ethnicity and identity, there really is no recognizable social science study of the *broader* aspects of culture and personality for African scholars or anyone else to pollute, devastate or otherwise influence. In my paper, rather than condemn I, overall, commend the efforts of African scholars for sustaining intellectual inquiry into such topics. Most importantly I praise the scholars for identifying and seriously exploring broad psychological and cultural patterns and processes they believe exist in Africa, without resorting to the stereotyping and useless modernity quantifiers of the past.

My call for social scientists to join African scholars outside the social sciences in this effort is a tribute to the persistence and insight of the African scholars. Social scientists are *not* being called upon to get the Africans on the right track or right a wrong done by them. I seek to have social scientists join in the pursuit of what appear to the African scholars surveyed and to me to be extremely fruitful lines of psychological and cultural inquiry in Africa.

Second, Masolo asserts that the selection I made of a "handful of works by scholars in East and South Africa" was made to support a "demonstration of the extent of this devastation (of African social studies)". Masolo also writes that my sample contains "particularly weak and clearly problematic publications by Africans" and that I discuss the issues the authors raise "widely out of context". My sample includes more than a handful of the writings of a diversity of eminent scholars from East, Southern and West Africa. It includes, for example, works by Ali Mazrui (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995), Augustine Shutte (1993) and Kwame Gyekye (1988 and 1996), respectively. The works of the scholars sampled, despite occasional social scientific methodological shortcomings, were put forward as examples of innovative analysis, compelling argument and leadership in a long-neglected area of inquiry that I believe social scientists should no longer ignore.

Masolo also claims that I am a proponent of the "noble rules and methods of ethnographic studies set in place by Western cultural and social anthropologists". Accusations of nobility in anthropology aside, if anything I make it clear that I am disappointed in the lack of interest in the social sciences in the study of the broader aspects of culture and personality. The subtitle

and content of my paper, in fact, call for social scientists, African and non-African, to reinvent ethnology by expanding its theoretical focus and methodology to encompass such studies as those I laboriously cited from the African scholars surveyed. This misrepresentation by Masolo is made worse by his misunderstanding of my comment--"such inquiry (becomes) no more than unscientific stereotyping, usually with malevolent intent and effect" (Lassiter 1999:2)--which he believes I wrote to refer to the African scholars cited. Here, and in using the term "bad social science" in my title, I refer to the works of Western social scientists of the 1950s and 1960s, *not* African scholars such as Thairu, Nyasani, and the others.

Finally, regarding the sample, Masolo writes that I "hide behind a wide but unused list of reference texts". Quoting from my paper's fifth endnote, I thoroughly reviewed a wide range of texts written by African scholars and chose to omit many from my paper "because they make little or no reference to pan-African culture and personality traits or patterns and processes of African cultural adaptation" (Lassiter 1999:13). I omitted these texts because they focus either on philosophy in the strictest sense of the term or social, economic and political development issues in Africa, yet give no attention to the broad or general patterns and processes of cultural and psychocultural adaptation on the continent.²

Third, Masolo claims that I conveniently leave out of my discussion a much wider tradition of literature, namely, the ethnophilosophical, Afrocentric and Pan-Africanist movements. To have ventured into the literature on these movements as Masolo believes I should would have taken me far from the main points I was trying to make. Masolo also writes that I fail to "take note of recent advances in anthropological discourse." Again, in my endnotes I "deferred for the time being trying to place my findings within the contemporary intellectual context that includes non-African scholars writing on African ethnicity and identity" (ibid).

He further asserts that I failed to "read Nyasani's (1996) text (*The African Psyche*) at least partly in relation to the rest of the history of African professional philosophy". A careful reading of Nyasani's book shows that he did not write it as philosophy, *per se*. In fact, except for his introductory chapters on elementary philosophy, Nyasani made virtually no effort to place his subsequent writing in the historical context of philosophy. Nyasani's main point was to illuminate broad patterns of African psychological and cultural adaptation to indigenous social influences and external cultural interference. His book in essence is a wake up call to Africans to take note of what he sees as negative psychological and cultural adaptive patterns and processes on the continent, and to apply the knowledge gained toward realizing a more positive and productive socioeconomic future for Africa.

Fourth, Masolo describes the work of Nyasani and others I reviewed as "particularly weak and clearly problematic." I believe this is a mistake. Though it was Nyasani's use of social science terminology I objected to most among all the scholars surveyed, it was, nevertheless, his analysis of the impact of indigenous African social organization and non-African cultural influence on Africa during the colonial period and after that I found most persuasive of all the writers surveyed, with the possible exception of Gyekye (1988 and 1996). Despite its flaws, Nyasani's work should be regarded as ground breaking, not weak and problematic. It is significant as a contribution to the study of African psychological and cultural adaptation, and as an innovative and plausible way of understanding many national and sociocultural problems in Africa's post-colonial history.

Fifth, Masolo surprisingly asserts that I might believe "(African) scholars lack the legitimacy to talk of who they think, imagine, or believe they are, or what their beliefs and practices are or should be". By implication, I believe Masolo is referring to the long-standing yet erroneous argument that only social scientists can speak objectively about the psychology and culture of their subjects, because their subjects are ill-equipped intellectually or are too subjectively immersed in their culture to do so. I do not question anyone's ability to legitimately and credibly speak or write about their own ethnicity, and there is nothing in my paper that suggests that I do.

Finally, Masolo writes that I take a "swipe" at Ali Mazrui (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995) concerning his use of the terms "East African mind" and "African Personality". Neither do I write from an "ignorance of the historical genealogy of that term and others", nor do I suffer from a "serious misreading of the intent and context" of the Mazruis' text. In my paper (Lassiter 1999:11) I cite Mazrui and Mazrui's purported link between the spread of Kiswahili and ethnic behavior and loyalty in East Africa as one of four primary areas I think are of extreme importance and of greatest need of further examination. Surely I am complimenting and showing appreciation for their lead, not taking a swipe at the Mazruis.

I have gone to much greater length than I wanted in this reply. However, I felt it was necessary due to the significant number of misunderstandings displayed and misrepresentations committed by Masolo. The tone and snide remarks found throughout his comment show that Masolo seeks to portray me as an unqualified, insensitive amateur meddling in areas I know little and care less about - Africans and their philosophy, psychology and culture. He tries to depict me as what he regards to be the typical Western social scientist, one with a superior attitude toward non-social science African scholarship. Note his remark: "One hopes here that Lassiter is not suggesting that these scholars lack the legitimacy to talk of who they think, imagine, or believe they are, or what their beliefs and practices are or should be." His sarcastic comment about the "noble rules and methods of ethnographic studies set in place by Western cultural and social anthropologists" is also noteworthy in this regard. Finally, his attack becomes personal and unprofessional when he accuses me of attempting to "hide behind a wide but unused list of reference texts". Regrettably, it appears that Masolo's comment is an attempt to stifle discussion on the issues addressed in my paper by focusing attention on me.

I regard my paper to be a seminal effort calling for a revitalization of social science inquiry into the broader patterns of African psychological and cultural adaptation. This call for an expanded approach to the study of culture has been of interest to me for over twenty years as shown in my professional publications and presentations. See Lassiter 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1983a, 1983b, 1990 and 2000. Despite Masolo's opinion to the contrary, I believe my Africa-focused education and experience are sufficient qualifications to explore the matters addressed in my paper, and perhaps contribute to the theoretical and methodological shift in anthropology and the social sciences I am calling for. This experience includes three and a half years service as a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Swaziland (1980-83), and five and a half years as Peace Corps Country Director in Tanzania and Ghana (1985-91). Also, as Assistant Immigration Attaché at the U. S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya from 1996-98 and a survivor of the August 7, 1998 bombing, I traveled extensively throughout rural and urban Africa to interview thousands of

UNHCR-referred refugees regarding their detailed persecution claims and applications for resettlement in the U.S.

Upon further reflection, the strength of Masolo's reaction to my paper reminds me of what my late father-in-law, the imminent Ugandan education administrator Mzee Lawrence Mukhama Kiondo, once told me. When I asked him early in my research if he thought I was playing with dynamite in addressing the topics found in my paper he said, true to his characteristic wit and humor: "No, not really. There is no particular problem in handling dynamite, as long as you keep it pointed in the right direction!"

Regrettably, Masolo seems to think that the targets of my figurative dynamite are the African scholars I survey, including him. That I should not be or am unfairly or disrespectfully criticizing African scholars. The fact is, despite my selective criticism of their methodology, I am not only respectful of the scholars, I am overall very much impressed, motivated, and encouraged by their work, especially their overall handling of these complex topics. I also fully agree with the scholars that these are matters of profound importance to Africa's future.

It is at my own discipline anthropology (especially ethnology) and the social sciences in general, not African scholars, that I am "aiming". I do so in the hope of encouraging my colleagues to take up a reinvented, more objective and useful study of the broader patterns and processes of African psychological and cultural adaptation, as suggested by the African scholars I survey.

As I state in my article's conclusion, "anthropology should not allow itself to be influenced by or become the *exclusive* domain of popular Western culture, political correctness, or social and political activism. Anthropology, and ethnology in particular, should freely pursue a full range of understandings of culture, specific cultures and their similarities and differences, the processes of regional and global cultural adaptation, and how such knowledge can improve human living conditions" (Lassiter 1999:12). In the future, thanks in no small part to Masolo's critique and Mzee Kiondo's advice, I will be more careful in the handling and aiming of scholarly dynamite!

Again, I am happy Professor Masolo submitted his comment. I hope he and I are able to continue this dialog on African matters of utmost importance and mutual interest. I also continue to fully welcome *all* reactions to my paper via the *African Studies Quarterly* and other journals, or at my e-mail address: Majahonkhe@yahoo.com.

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Notes

1. The opinions and conclusions expressed in this reply are solely those of the author. They in no way reflect or otherwise represent the policies or official positions of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service or any other U. S. Government entity.
2. A brief note: Since returning from Africa, I have been able to acquire and study in depth additional works by Appiah (1992), Gyekye (1995 and 1997), Mudimbe (1988 and 1994) and others. Contrary to Masolo's assertion, these works were *not* readily available during my refugee processing travel and concurrent research on the paper in Africa. For the most part, I am finding that these outstanding works, which I will treat in future articles, lend further support to the main points in my paper, specifically, that the works of non-social science African scholars on African culture and personality are extremely valuable and their arguments compelling. And that the authors of such works should be joined by social scientists in conducting further studies in these areas.

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