African Culture And Personality: Bad Social Science, Effective Social Activism, Or A Call To Reinvent Ethnology?

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

This paper surveys and assesses the writings of selected African scholars on what they regard to be pan-African culture and personality traits, and patterns and processes of African cultural adaptation (1). Suggestions are also made for reinventing the study of African social, cultural and psychological characteristics, and using such knowledge to help solve socioeconomic problems in Africa. Finally, comments are made regarding the impact of socio-cultural particularism and Western individualism on the study of culture and cultural evolution.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, national character and typical personality studies were broadly condemned, breathed their last gasp, and were ultimately relegated to the dustbin of bad social science. Since that time, various African scholars outside the social sciences have nevertheless been sustaining and redirecting group personality inquiry. They are not, however, approaching their subject as did Western social scientists in the first half of this century who used questionnaire instruments to determine if Africans were "traditional" or "modern" (2). This was a particularly popular approach among Western occupational psychologists working in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s who sought to scientifically assign statistical coefficients of modernization to African populations. They did this, for the most part, to find out which African groups were better suited for white or blue collar work in the colonial and post-independence socioeconomic setup (3). The majority of prior culture and personality researchers focusing on Africa were interested in creating and testing a "traditional/Western measuring device" (Dawson 1967), "assaying psychological modernization" (Doob 1967), or "measuring individual modernity" (Smith and Inkeles 1966, Kahl 1968, and Gough 1975 and 1976).

African scholars writing on these subjects since the early 1960s have taken a humanistic, liberating or empowering approach. They have been specifically interested in identifying and explaining African psychological processes, personality characteristics, and the processes of African cultural adaptation to indigenous social conditions and exotic influences. For example, the work of University of Nairobi philosophy professor Joseph M. Nyasani (1997), which features prominently in this paper, is a recent attempt to define the "African psyche."

CURRENT WESTERN PERSPECTIVES AND METHODS

Since the 1960s, the predominant approach to social and cultural research among social scientists has been to examine a clearly defined society, population, sector, geographically defined area, or topic. Such research tends to steer away from cultural and psychological generalizations at higher levels of social organization such as the ethnic group, society, nation or geographical regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. Culture and personality and broad cultural adaptation studies

became and remain the target of the most severe criticism by social scientists and social advocates. Many, in fact, consider such inquiry to be no more than unscientific stereotyping, usually with malevolent intent and effect. Some argue that group personality studies are an anathema to cultural relativism and the particularistic study of singular populations and topics. Still others go as far as to assert that all culture and personality studies obscure the uniqueness of the individual, and divert attention and resources from more fruitful lines of inquiry such as the dynamics of class struggle and the scientific study of particular social structures and functions. At its worst, critics and social advocates say, group personality studies and inquiry into broad patterns of cultural adaptation on the part of social scientists exacerbate racism and bigotry. So, for the sake of not giving legitimacy to broad cultural generalizations, which the detractors say will most likely be misused to oppress or persecute a particular group, all efforts in the social sciences to identify and study core cultural traits and make cross cultural comparisons in search of broad patterns of cultural adaptation are condemned and rejected.

I do not mean in any way to disparage particularistic types of academic and problem-oriented research. African social scientists, in general, like their Western particularist counterparts, have also moved toward greater topical and problematic specificity in their social research to more accurately focus their efforts (4). However, the work of African scholars outside the social sciences, such as that surveyed here, suggests that it is time to reintroduce culture and personality and cultural adaptation studies of contemporary populations into the social science mainstream.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES AND METHODS

From the early sixties to the present, African scholars outside the social sciences have consistently claimed that there have been, are and will continue to be widespread psychological and cultural themes and patterns that there are unique to sub-Saharan Africa (5). They also argue that these broad themes and patterns are undergoing rapid change in a similar manner and most often for the worse throughout most of the continent. The strength of their commitment to these concepts is reflected in the fact that the scholars persist in their efforts despite a historical intellectual context that eschews such inquiry. This survey reveals they have done so to clarify and extol the virtues of what it means to be African in the face of increasing global Westernization, and to identify and promote the importance of "Africanness" in African national and regional development. African scholars also seek to reassert Africa's importance in the broader philosophical and cultural evolution of humankind. Although some of the works contain significant methodological shortcomings which will be addressed below, most of the scholars' assertions and arguments are well-reasoned and extremely compelling.

Social scientific approaches to African culture and personality are regarded by many African thinkers to be part of a long-standing and concerted Western effort to suppress and dominate Africans (See especially Thairu [1975] and Nyasani [1997]). In contrast, African scholars' approaches outside the social sciences have been theoretically and methodologically eclectic and intended to protect and liberate Africans, not dominate or control them. For example, Kenyan medical doctor and author Kihumbu Thairu (1975) offers a personally challenging approach that focuses on the need for Africans to rediscover who they are, independent of their assimilated Western values and ways of thinking and behaving.

South African professor and former Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Witswatersrand M. W. Makgoba (1997), using a more practical and problem-focused approach to bring matters back to the social scientists, sees a prominent and

practical role for African social scientists in the post-colonial reconstruction of Africa. He writes:

Africa has faced some of the great social changes in this century in terms of race, ethnicity, politics, violence, labour relations and industrialisation. Graduates in the social sciences are going to be a critical component to the success of African democracies as they struggle to emerge from the mess in which they have been. Universities are not only essential for the training and nurturing of highly-skilled scholars in this area, but are poised to make a unique contribution to the overall development of post-colonial Africa (1997:180).

AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

All the scholars surveyed believe there are categories and processes of thought that are unique to Africa. African scholars also believe that the African way of organizing and cognitively engaging the world derives from a strongly restrictive indigenous sociocultural milieu, and that this approach to social life and the broader world has been negatively effected by Western cultural influences. Regrettably, however, the African scholars surveyed sometimes use what is normally regarded to be social scientific terminology in making reference to what they regard to be widespread African psychological and cultural characteristics, yet do not clearly define or qualify such usage. With the exception of Geyekye (1988), they also fail to clearly and consistently link their assertions and arguments to historical and ethnographic data. For example, political scientist and historian Ali A. Mazrui, in his most recent attempt to place Kiswahili language as a crucial element in East Africa's political and economic development and ultimate regional integration, refers to the "East African mind" as follows:

"The psychology of living together is also undergoing a change - and Kiswahili is part of the new East African mind in communion with the modern world" (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995:134). Further, Mazrui's collaborator and linguist, Alamin M. Mazrui, in a discussion of nationalism and the contributions of African Americans to Africa, states that "African Americans have made important philosophical and political contributions to the formation of movements like Negritude, pan-Africanism, and the African personality" (1995:161, emphasis mine).

Nyasani (1997) is no more reticent in his vaguely defined references to the "African mind" and its characteristics. He believes that "in the same way reference is made to the Greek or Roman civilization, it must be quite appropriate and legitimate to refer to a particular strand of mind that is quite peculiar to Africa and which shapes the prevailing conditions or permits itself to adapt to those conditions. ... (T)here is a distinctive feature about the African mind which seems to support the claim that the mind in black Africa may not necessarily operate in the same strict pattern as minds elsewhere in the world.... (I)t is the way our mind functions and operates under certain conditions that we are able to arrogate to ourselves a peculiar status, social identification and geographical label" (1997:51-55, emphases mine).

According to Nyasani (1997:56-57), African, Asian and European minds are products of unique "cultural edifices" and "cultural streams" that arose from environmental conditioning and long-standing cultural traditions. Within the African cultural stream, Nyasani claims, are psychological and moral characteristics pertaining to African identity, personality and dignity. Makgoba (1997) goes further and argues that throughout the African Diaspora peoples of African descent:

"are linked by shared values that are fundamental features of African identify and culture. These, for example, include hospitality, friendliness, the consensus and common framework-seeking principle, ubuntu, and the emphasis on community rather than on the individual. These features typically underpin the variations of African culture and identity everywhere. The existence of African identity is not in doubt" (1997:197-198).

Regarding personality characteristics he believes to be inherent in the African mind, Nyasani identifies and discusses sociality, patience, tolerance, sympathy and acceptance as:

"areas in which the African mind seems to reveal itself in a somewhat dramatic way. It reveals itself through what may rightly be called a congenital trait of sociality or sociability. It further reveals itself as a virtuous natural endowment of patience and tolerance. And lastly it manifests itself as a natural disposition for mutual sympathy and acceptance. These three areas then appear to serve as important landmarks in the general description of the phenomenology of the African mind" (1997:57, emphases mine).

Caught in a social pyramid characterized by a one-way vertical authority structure and a two-way horizontal family and communal support system, the African mind, beset with superstition and destabilized by Western acculturation, is relatively unilinear, uncritical, lacking in initiative and therefore "encapsulated," says Nyasani. This, Nyasani (1997) insists, has been extremely negative for Africa, especially in terms of the African individual's creativity and ability to innovate:

(W)hat we experience in the practical life of an African is the apparent stagnation or stalemate in his social as well as economic evolution.... It is quite evident that the social consequences of this unfortunate social impasse (encapsulation) can be very grave especially where the process of acculturation and indeterminate enculturation is taking place at an uncontrollable pace.[illegible] By and large, it can safely be affirmed that social encapsulation in Africa works both positively and negatively. It is positive in as far as it guarantees a modicum of social cohesion, social harmony and social mutual concern. However, in as far as it does not promote fully the exercise of personal initiative and incentive, it can be regarded as negative (Nyasani 1997:130-131, emphases mine).

AFRICAN SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The African scholars surveyed, with the possible exception of Ghanian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1988), regard African concepts of the individual and self to be almost totally dependent on and subordinate to social entities and cultural processes. Kenyan theology professor John S. Mbiti (1969 and 1992), for example, believes that the individual has little latitude for self determination outside the context of the traditional African family and community. He writes:

"Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man" (1969:109).

For Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1988), the individual, although originating from and inextricably bound to his family and community, nevertheless possesses a clear concept of himself as a distinct person of volition. It is from this combined sense of personhood and communal membership that the family and community expect individuals to take personally enhancing and socially responsible decisions and actions. Although he accepts that the dominant entity of African social order is the community, Gyekye believes "it would be more correct to describe that order as amphibious, for it manifests features of both communality and individuality. [illegible] African social thought seeks to avoid the excesses of the two exaggerated systems, while allowing for a meaningful, albeit uneasy, interaction between the individual and the society" (1988:31-32).

Agreeing with Gyekye, Senegalese philosopher Leopold Senghor (1966) regards traditional African society to be "based both on the community and on the person and in which, because it was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had

priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person" (1966:5).

South African philosophy professor Augustine Shutte (1993), citing the Xhosa proverb umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (a person is a person through persons), writes:

This (proverb) is the Xhosa expression of a notion that is common to all African languages and traditional cultures.... (It) is concerned both with the peculiar interdependence of persons on others for the exercise, development and fulfilment of their powers that is recognised in African traditional thought, and also with the understanding of what it is to be a person that underlies this.... In European philosophy of whatever kind, the self is always envisaged as something "inside" a person, or at least as a kind of container of mental properties and powers. In African thought it is seen as "outside," subsisting in relationship to what is other, the natural and social environment. In fact the sharp distinction between self and world, a self that controls and changes the world and is in some sense "above" it, this distinction so characteristic of European philosophy, disappears. Self and world are united and intermingle in a web of reciprocal relations (1993:46-47).

In contrast to Gyekye's mutually enhancing understanding and Shutte's idea that the community empowers and inculcates "personness," Nyasani (1997) possesses a far less egalitarian view of the individual in African society. According to Nyasani, the African individual hardly knows how to act outside the context of his community's prescriptions and proscriptions. For Nyasani, the existence of the individual in African society is a "quasi-dissolution into the reality of others for the sake of the individual's existence" (1997:60). For him, "everything boils down to the 'me' in the 'we' or rather to the survival of the self through the enhancement and consolidation of the 'we' as a generic whole....Thus, in Africa, the individual will go to all lengths to ascertain the condition of the corporate 'we' and to play his part, if necessary, to restore the balance of wholesomeness" (1997:81-82).

There are many particularistic studies of the attitudes and values of Africans by African and non-African scholars that support the assertions made by Nyasani and others regarding African concepts of self and the place of the individual in African societies (6).

THE AFRICAN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Nyasani (1997) identifies the traditional African family as a setting wherein the vertical power structure of the society is introduced and sustained as predominant over the freedom of individuals. For Nyasani there is a "fundamental difference between the traditional African child and a child in the Western culture. The child in Africa was muzzled right from the outset and was thereby drilled into submission to authority from above" (1997:129).

Within the communal context, Nyasani (1997) argues that Africans exhibit an

"endemic and congenital trait of what could be described as a natural benign docility generally brought about by years of blind social submission and unquestioning compliance to the mystique of higher authority that reigns surreptitiously yet effectively in all black African societies in varying degrees. This benign natural docility is generally regarded as positive, legitimate and virtuous strictly within the context of a traditional social regime" (1997:113, emphases mine).

Community norms, he says

"are merely received but never subjected to the scrutiny of reason to establish their viability and practicability in the society.... Maybe, it is because of this lack of personal involvement and personal scrutiny that has tended to work to the disadvantage of the Africans especially where they are faced with a critical situation of reckoning about their own destiny and even dignity" (Nyasani 1997:63-69).

Steven Shalita (1998), Kampala bureau chief for The East African, the sub-region's premier English weekly newspaper, blames the colonial past, in part, for African passivity and complacency. He argues that a

"passive attitude to life is common in many parts of Africa, where most people are satisfied with the minimum. Many Africans prefer to engage in subsistence farming rather than farming for profit and even then, they wait for some bureaucrat to tell them about food security to save them from starvation when drought strikes. [illegible] This complacency by ordinary people can partly be blamed on the colonial legacy which put such emphasis on government. It caused them to believe that government owed them a living and if things went wrong, why then government was to blame and must find a solution" (1998:10).

THE AFRICAN WORLD VIEW

Senghor (1966), in comparing Africans and Europeans, argues that there is a unique African world view focused on what he describes as "being" and "life forces." He writes

(T)he African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially static, objective, dichotomous; it is, in fact, dualistic, in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is founded on separation and opposition, on analysis and conflict. The African, on the other hand, conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile yet unique reality that seeks synthesis....This reality is being, in the ontological sense of the word, and it is life force. For the African, matter in the sense the Europeans understand it, is only a system of signs which translates the single reality of the universe: being, which is spirit, which is life force. Thus, the whole universe appears as an infinitely small, and at the same time infinitely large, network of life forces[illegible]" (1966:4).

Shutte (1993), like Senghor, argues that the force or energy of life (seriti) is at the center of, sustains and permeates the traditional African world view. As such it

"is the most fundamental (feature) in traditional African world-views.... It is moreover a dynamic system in that the force of everything, at least all living things, is continuously being either strengthened or weakened. Human beings continuously influence each other, either directly or indirectly by way of sub-human forces or through the ancestors" (1993:52-54).

From Nyasani's (1997:97-100) perspective, the world view of the African under colonialism became one where African cultural traditions, beliefs and behaviors were regarded by Africans to be inferior when compared to non-African ways. This, he says, resulted in self-loathing among Africans. In fact, he asserts, the world view of most contemporary Africans was replaced by and therefore is in many ways indistinguishable from the European world view.

AFRICAN RESPONSES TO FOREIGN INFLUENCES

In general, the authors surveyed argue that the African individual's response to overpowering foreign influences has been and remains derived from the personal strategy he uses for survival within the African family and community context--unquestioning acceptance and conformity. Therefore, the larger world, like his family and communal milieu, presents the African individual with an equally formidable set of circumstances and requirements he is conditioned not to challenge, is dependent on and from which he cannot escape.

Makgoba (1997) clearly identifies the motives behind the interest of this larger world of non-Africans as follows:

"Knowledge about African people is always political, useful in maintaining intellectual neo-colonialism, propagates Western culture, helps generate and perpetuate an inferiority complex (in Africans), fosters individualism amongst

Africans, disrupts organisation and unity in the (African) community because there is inherent fear of a united, organised Afrocentric community, or a combination of all of the above. In short, we are (regarded to be) a people who can only succeed, realise our potential and destiny by being controlled, policed, nursed and guided by Europeans. We are (therefore) incapable of being masters of our own destiny" (1997:205).

Concerning the impact of foreign socioeconomic ideology, Gyekye (1988) argues that preeminent African leaders such as Senghor, Nyerere and Nkrumah, all of whom underwent advanced Western education, incorrectly regarded Western socialism to be compatible with traditional African communalism. The consequences of their efforts to use Western socialist ideology as a framework for nation-building in Africa were devastating, he says. Gyekye argues that African communalism is "essentially and basically a socio-ethical doctrine, not economic; whereas socialism, as I understand it, is primarily an economic arrangement, involving the public control of all the dynamics of the economy.... (Not) everything that can be asserted of communalism can be asserted also for socialism, and vice-versa" (1988:24-26).

Kenyan philosopher D. A. Masolo (1995) agrees that "the failures of Nyerere's ujamaa were due, more than anything else, to the poor sociological assessment of the causes of the apparent communalistic 'attitudes' in African traditional social relations. ... Taking the communalistic phenomenon of African traditional society as a given, Nyerere proceeded to inappropriately build upon it a social-political structure--the ujamaa system" (1995:27-28).

Culturally, it is as if the traditional African script of "submit to family and community authority and immerse yourself in and partake of all group values and norms" was rewritten during the colonial period. Through force, Western education and missionary proselytization, the colonialists subordinated traditional African authority and the values and norms of African communalism in the minds of Africans. This new anti-African script, argues Nyasani (1997), remains deeply imbeded in the minds of contemporary Africans to the point that they:

"have adopted and assimilated wholesale whatever the West has to offer. The end result is not just a cultural betrayal but a serious case of self-dehumanization and outright self-subversion both in terms of dignity and self-esteem. Indeed there is no race on earth that abhors its own culture and is so easily prepared to abdicate it and flirt with experimental ideas which promise no more than vanity, to a large extent, like the African race.... Africa is simply overwhelmed and decisively submerged by the never-receding tide of cultural imperialism" (1997:126-128).

Psychologically, Nyasani argues that the Africans' "natural benign docility" contributed to and exacerbated Africa's widespread social and cultural demise via Western acculturation. He argues that "it would not be difficult to imagine the ripe conditions encountered at the dawn of European imperialism for unbridled exploitations and culture emasculations which left many an African society completely distraught and culturally defrocked. Indeed the exploiting schemers must have found a ready market glutted with cultural naiveties for quick but effective alienation" (1997:113-114). The post-colonial era has been no different, Nyasani says, in that contemporary "black Africa is painfully crucified on the cross of blackmailers, arm-twisters and their forever more enslaving technologies and each nail of the cross belongs to the economic aid donor nation" (1997:96)!

Regarding the impact of Westernization on African community and family life, Preston Chitere (see Kimani 1998), Kenyan rural sociologist at the University of Nairobi, offers the following observations regarding the current state of the African family in Kenya, a state or condition that exists in many other sub-Saharan African nations:

"The effects of capitalism are already being felt in our families. Individualism in society is increasing. Even families in rural areas like to operate in isolation, and those who offer any help are keen to help their immediate families only. The

(conjugal) family is becoming more independent. The loss of community networks and the development of individualism have resulted in (increased occurrences of) suicide, loneliness, drug abuse and mental illness. The communal system is breaking down. The extended family had certain functions to perform, for instance, to reconcile couples at loggerheads with each other, but this is no longer the case. It is no one (else's) business to know what's happening in one's marriage today (Kimani 1998:1)."

APPLYING THE "NEW AFRICAN ETHNOLOGY"

Ghanaian historian Osei (1971:62-63) believes that Africa should chart its future from its indigenous cultural traditions and adopt and adapt only those aspects of non-African cultures that are compatible with Africa's needs, goals and circumstances--namely, a scientific perspective and Western educational practices. Taking a broader perspective, Thairu (1975:168-169) argues for a future of greater regional integration through educational and cultural exchanges within and between African nations. This, he says, will bring into the open pan-African cultural similarities, promote more widespread understanding and tolerance on the continent, and contribute to greater overall African unity. Philosopher Gyekye (1988) shares much of Nyasani, Makgoba and Thairu's concern over Africans too often forsaking indigenous African values and their wholesale and uncritical adoption of Western ideologies and institutions.

One of the most unusual efforts among contemporary African scholars to apply traditional African concepts to national development is that of South African Lovemore Mbigi of the Ubuntu Institute near Pretoria. Professor Mbigi (1997), freely using expressions such as "ancient African wisdom," argues that the traditional African concept ubuntu ("I am because we are. I can only be a person through others.") is useful for African corporate and organizational executives, managers and others pursuing organizational or national transformation. Mbigi argues that "birthing rituals are important in African societies....Leaders must carry out the birthing rituals of creativity and innovation in organisations. They must have a sense of legacy and selflessness if they are going to define the ultimate mystery and meaning of human existence to their followers" (1997:37).

The emphasis on Africa's traditional past as found in the writings of Nyasani and the other African scholars reviewed in this paper, however, is not without its African detractors. Kenyan philosopher Masolo (1995), for example, in his discussion of "ethnophilosophy" (formal efforts to systematically describe traditional African beliefs and practices) finds little in Africa's past that can be applied to the present and future of the continent. He believes that

"philosophers who are seeking to revive and reinstate the traditional African philosophy as the appropriate philosophy for Africa today are [illegible] doing disservice to Africa in trying to pretend that that philosophy is still sufficient or useful or applicable to Africa's needs, i.e., that it is able to cope with the new and modern problems and issues facing Africa today as brought in with encroaching modernization. And because this encroachment requires new methods of investigation and analysis, which must be diversified due to the complexity of the situation, ethnophilosophy just has no place in it" (1995:225).

Similarly, Gyekye (1996) abhors the fact that ancestors continue to be of paramount importance in modern and traditional African life. He also recommends that for Africa to progress scientifically and technologically, "science should be rescued from the morass of (traditional) African religious and mystical beliefs" (1996:174). Nevertheless, Gyekye insists there are many "cultural values and practices of traditional Africa (that) can be considered positive features of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity, even if they must undergo some refinement and pruning to become fully harmonious with the spirit of modern

culture and to function satisfactorily within that culture" (ibid.). He discusses these traditional African values at length under the following chapter headings: humanity and brotherhood, communalism and individualism, morality, the family, economic system, chiefship and politics, human rights, knowledge and wisdom, and aesthetics.
Kenyan social commentator Mwiti Mugambi (1998) pragmatically argues that the future of Africa can only be forged from accepting and mending the sociocultural present. For Mugambi it is only from aggressively addressing the practical problems found within African nations that improvements in Africa can be made. Colonial cultural hangovers, pervasive Western cultural inundation, and aid-giving arm-twisting donors are, he argues, here to stay and no amount of looking into Africa's past will make them go away. He asserts that:
"Colonisation and westernisation have brought a permanent and irreversible change in Africa.• As long as we continue talking of Africanisation and 'going back to our roots' yet we remain quiet on the reality of modern society, we will sound foolish, out-dated and out of touch with reality. ... What African writers and scholars should do is deal with the issues that are afflicting our society such as violence, corruption and rising costs of basic needs, rather than waste time on the issue of 'Africanness'. ... (T)he effects of Westernisation are here to stay and the faster we adapt to living with them the better for us and the generations to come" (1998:III).
Finally, Sam Mwale (1998), journalist and commentator on Kenyan public policy issues, writing on U.S. President Clinton's recent visit to the continent, believes that the U.S. head of state's references to an "Africa that works" and an "African Renaissance" were premature. Mwale argues that, yes, the nations that Mr. Clinton visited have, in fact, instituted significant reforms; however, "Africa does not work" in three of Africa's four largest regional economies--Nigeria, Kenya and Congo-Kinshasa. Mwale believes that a true renaissance can only be said to have occurred when fundamental changes in how African societies operate have taken place. That "economic development on the continent is taking place in a cultural and philosophical vacuum. The cultural foundations of virtually all African nations remain undefined--an unrefined mish-mash of traditional, colonial and neo-colonial cultures and identities. From this have often arisen the clan, ethnic, racial and religious fault-lines that have been the bane of independent Africa" (1998:23).
For Mwale, an Africa "that works" would show signs of reversing the crushing conditions of poverty and low economic opportunity under which over eighty percent of Africa's people now live. Regrettably, says Mwale, not one of the countries mentioned as "working" has as its first budgetary priority solving these two most basic of problems. Mwale's solution to Africa's future lies in the emergence of ethnically pluralistic societies on the continent. He argues that:
"despite the wonderful talk of an African renaissance, there is no evidence of attempts to evolve an all-embracing culture which allows a healthy expression of diversity. Without a mosaic (national) culture that provides room for co-existence, there cannot be an inclusive political philosophy that allows all to become stake holders in government. Neither can there be a moral order--upon which all development is predicated--without a solid cultural foundation.... Africa's post-colonial trauma results from institutions, governance and economic development models without any cultural underpinnings" (ibid).

CULTURAL RELATIVITY AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

In the 1960s, cultural relativism came to dominate the social sciences and civil rights emerged at the top of America's sociopolitical agenda. Both historical movements were welcome and necessary for the emergence of a greater respect for the individual and his humanity, and for acknowledging and respecting cultural diversity in a rapidly shrinking global community. These changes were significant and a very much needed improvement over the narrow, ethnocentric approaches to ethnicity that preceded them. Regrettably, the response within the social sciences to the ascendance of cultural relativity and heightened ethnic sensitivity and

politicization was to retreat from studying broad patterns of culture and cultural adaptation toward a narrower focus on particularistic studies of societies and cultures.

This resultant lack of social scientific interest in the study of the broader aspects of African culture and personality manifests itself in the often vague, inappropriate and less than effective manner with which the African scholars surveyed in this paper, for example, use social scientific terms and concepts. Despite the lack of social scientific interest in this form of inquiry and the fact that there is no unanimity regarding the meaning of culture and personality terms and concepts, there are nevertheless many terminological and conceptual usages cited in the foregoing excerpts that easily exceed or violate the most liberal of social scientific definitions. This is of concern because the high intellectual status of the writers legitimizes such usage. It also misinforms and misleads non-social scientists and other readers of their works. For example, an editorial essay in the March 23-29, 1998 edition of The East African, East Africa's best English weekly newspaper, made the following comment on U.S. president Clinton's 1998 visit to Rwanda:

"His aim in Kigali will be to condemn the 1994 genocide and to stress that ethnic killing must be rooted out of the African psyche. Genocide is by no means unique to Africa but our record of violence stemming from tribalism is a bad one, as recent incidents in Kenya, for instance, attest. If President Clinton can convey the repugnance of the international community for this shameful and recurring madness that afflicts Africa, more power to him" (emphases mine).

This reference to the "African psyche" may well have been derived from someone on the East African's editorial staff having read and been convinced of the validity of such usage as it appears in Nyasani's (1997) book of the same title (7).

I do not agree with those who argue that the non-participation of social scientists in group culture and personality studies is as it should be. I do accept and agree that purposeful insensitivity to the validity of any social group's ethnicity, values and beliefs is never acceptable and should be challenged from all quarters. However, cultural relativity, social science particularism, and social activism should not be allowed to block, overtly or subtly, responsible inquiry into the patterns and processes of contemporary global cultural adaptation. The African scholars, as evidenced by their generalistic yet persuasive works cited in this paper, are obviously undeterred by such inhibiting influences. As such, they should be encouraged and joined by social scientists in these areas of inquiry. Both levels of inquiry, the particular and general, are needed if for no other reason than to promote more informed, accurate, and effective international discourse and relations. An emphasis on sociocultural differences and uniqueness is important and, in fact, essential for enhancing individual identity and social cohesion, and furthering sociopolitical goals.

Particularism, however, needs to be counterbalanced and contextualized by studies that emphasize cross-cultural similarities such as the works cited in this paper. If not, the evils of cultural stereotypes, ethnocentrism and bigotry spawned by past culture and personality studies will be replaced by particularism's negative outcomes of greater cultural exclusivity, arrogance, intolerance, xenophobia, mistrust, and inter-group conflict. Put simply, it is generally recognized that conflict is more likely to arise among peoples who accentuate their differences and uniqueness rather than among those who acknowledge and celebrate their similarities. If nothing else, there should be a freeing-up of academic and public discourse such that sociocultural uniqueness is respected and the characteristics shared by related or similar sociocultural groups are acknowledged, discussed, and used to find common ground for resolving conflict and sustaining cooperation. Regrettably, free discourse of this kind does not widely characterize the current state of discourse within academia. Such discourse and goals are also lacking in international (especially inter-governmental) relations where national and sub-

national sociopolitical uniqueness, competition and efforts to control and dominate are most often touted and pursued.

REINVENTING CULTURE AND PERSONALITY STUDIES

In light of both the strengths and the weaknesses of contemporary African scholars' efforts at generalizing about African culture and personality, I encourage among African and non-African social scientists a reinvention of African ethnology and crosscultural studies. To the particularist core of the social sciences should be added an inter-disciplinary approach where the focus is on African core cultural values, cultural themes and, most importantly, widespread patterns and processes of cultural adaptation. The focus should not be on stereotypes, typical personalities, modernity coefficients, etc., but rather on adaptive cultural processes and trends. The descriptions and insights derived should be firmly grounded in the substantive data of history, particularist ethnographies and applied anthropology case studies.

Reinventing ethnology along these lines will not be easy. The social sciences, in the United States in particular, it appears, are suffering from a malady similar to that in the humanities described by University of California, Santa Cruz Professor Emeritus John Ellis (1996). In his book Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities, Ellis argues that:

"academic literary criticism has been transformed" from traditional inquiry into a overarching search for relevance and significance applicable to modern society. That literature and humanistic inquiry are subverted to quests for political power such that "the universities should have an overtly political function, work directly for social and political change, and inculcate a particular political viewpoint in their students."

Every piece of literature, Ellis argues, is too often reduced to issues of race, gender and class where expressions of victimization and oppression are focused on to the exclusion of all else. Ellis argues that "if we are determined to take from literature only the attitudes that we bring to it, it ceases to have any point". A large group of contemporary scholars, Ellis notes, "have no real interest in what literature might say (in its full diversity), only an interest in what they can use it for" (1996:13).

What Ellis describes for the humanities is also true for Western social science, at least where culture and personality studies are concerned. Social scientists and/or social activists who seek to promote greater diversity in the controlling sectors of society, and related agendas, are too often the first to restrict social science inquiry to areas of theory and methodology that promote or at minimum support their particular brand of political and social activism. For example, at present, at least in the U.S., culture and personality studies or their associated concepts are condemned when they are seen as harmful to social and political change, yet embraced when they are seen as advancing such causes. This low tolerance for a wide diversity of approaches in the social sciences is such that academic freedom is stifled from a fear of offending a colleague at the academy, or being lambasted as being a bigot for suggesting that it may be worthwhile researching and describing core cultural values and broad patterns of cultural adaptation within and between large contemporary populations.

If social scientists, as Makgoba (1997) asserts, have a crucial and practical role to play in African socioeconomic development, we must identify particular and general themes and patterns of cultural adaptation and their attendant psychological processes throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The first step in expanding what are acceptable social science areas of inquiry is to look at what scholars in the lesser developed societies such as those in Africa are focusing on. This paper has made an attempt to move discussion and debate in this direction. The second step is to investigate the validity of specific claims of pan-African cultural and psychological traits and adaptive responses. The assertions made by the African scholars surveyed above suggest new areas of research as follows:

1. Do traditional African authority structures and communal proscriptions and prescriptions give rise to psychological handicaps, such as "natural benign docility" or "mental encapsulation" (Nyasani 1997:113, 130-131), that have and continue to put Africans at a disadvantage when confronting non-African cultural influences? Or, is Gyekye (1988:31-32) correct in asserting that African communalism allows for and demands individual expression and accountability; and that the causes of Africa's cultural maladaptations are to be found elsewhere? Are Masolo (1995) and Mugambi (1998) correct in insisting that the solutions to Africa's problems and its future are not to be found in Africa's traditional past, rather in addressing the problems of the present, using contemporary methods?
2. Is Nyasani (1997:51-55) justified in insisting there is such a thing as an African "mentality" or "psyche" that arose from and reflects a long history of social, cultural and environmental adaptation and acculturation? Is he justified in positing the existence of African, European and Asian "cultural streams and edifices" (1997:57)?
3. Mazrui and Mazrui (1995:1-3) argue that Kiswahili has promoted "detribalization" in East Africa in the sense of "declining 'ethnic behavior'". Yet, they say there is "stable or even increasing ethnic loyalty in terms of emotional attachment". Do ethnographic and other sources support this? Attitude and values surveys should be conducted to test this assertion. If true, how widespread and intense are these ethnic "behaviors" and "loyalties"?
4. Are prominent Kenyan social commentator Philip Ochieng's (1998) assertions about Luo culture, group personality and origins valid? Has Luo cultural arrogance undermined their pursuit of political power in Kenya? How do Luos view their history and culture vis-a-vis other tribes and ethnic groups?

CONCLUSION

Numerous core values, cultural themes and patterns of cultural adaptation unique to Africa have been presented in this paper, as identified in the writings of selected African scholars. Most of the writers effectively argue that there is a widespread pattern of social and cultural maladaptation within African societies evidenced by continuing national development under-achievement and less than optimal regional socioeconomic integration. This is regarded by the majority of the writers to be a post-colonial legacy, the result of ongoing external interference, and a now endemic and intense African admiration of Western culture over African culture. The African scholars' prescriptions for Africa's future focus on economic independence through educational processes that combine Western techno-economic theory and practice with the best of African sociocultural traditions. Overall, the efforts of the African scholars examined in this paper are significant and provocative contributions to understanding Africa and its peoples. However, their works, excluding Gyekye (1988), are not clearly or consistently tied to ethnographic and historical data. This omission weakens their often innovative insights and arguments. It also prohibits independent cross-cultural comparison and verification of their generalizations and persuasive assertions. Finally, their conclusions and recommendations are weakened by their not adequately addressing cultural and behavioral variation and deviance within and outside Africa.

Social scientists, including ethnologists, should join African scholars outside the social sciences in studying the broader core values, cultural themes and adaptive responses of Africans to indigenous sociocultural circumstances and external influences. Regrettably, eminent Western scholars such as Eric Wolf (1994) continue to encourage anthropologists along the narrow path of particularism in their studies of culture in order to "take much greater account of heterogeneity and contradictions in cultural systems" (1994:7). Conceptions of race, culture and people will indeed remain "perilous ideas", as Professor Wolf calls them, if social scientists continue to avoid such broader global cultural landscapes that in fact unite us, and focus only on particularistic studies of societies and cultures that separate us and allow us to stand proudly apart. What is worse, however, is that

without generalistic studies of cross-cultural similarities and broad patterns of cultural adaptation serving to complement particularistic studies, we risk increasing the global occurrence and intensity of cultural isolationism and arrogance, xenophobia, inter-cultural misunderstanding, and international conflict. Perilous ideas, indeed!

Anthropology should not allow itself to be influenced by or become the exclusive domain of contemporary 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. Particularistic studies of cultures, groups and sociocultural topics, alone, are not enough. To this must be added the study of core cultural values and themes, patterns of regional cultural adaptation and global acculturation. The imprecise usage of cultural and psychological terminology and concepts by scholars outside the social sciences and the social science community's refusal to attend to large group psychological processes and the broader patterns of human cultural adaptation are significant matters. They tend to draw attention away from our common humanity and destiny, and impede understanding of on-going global cultural processes of utmost importance. However, all of us, Africans and non-Africans, scholars, social scientists and the public, have a personal responsibility to ensure, by all means possible, that such broad cultural and psychological understandings are not used to legitimize injustices or promote malevolent struggles for political power and dominance.

Endnotes

(1)The opinions and conclusions expressed in this paper 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. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the following African scholars and educators who reviewed and commented on this paper in the earliest stages of its preparation: Howard University Education Professor Emeritus Paul Emoungu, Mr. Yves Kore, M.Ed., M.P.A., and Ms. Immy Rose Namutosi, B.A., D.S.E. I am also most grateful to Anthropology Professor Vernon R. Dorjahn and Assistant Anthropology Professor Jerry Marr of the University of Oregon who reviewed and provided comments on early and later drafts of the paper. Their candid and at times sharp criticism were invaluable and greatly improved the paper in many ways. The fact that they reviewed and commented on drafts of the paper does not mean that they necessarily endorse all the opinions I have expressed, approaches I have taken, or conclusions I have drawn. The shortcomings that remain, and opinions expressed, in this article are mine alone and for which, I am fully responsible.

(2) The terms "tradition" and "traditional" occur frequently in the writings of the Western social scientists and contemporary African scholars cited in this paper. However, all the scholars seldom, if ever, define the terms outright. "Tradition" and "traditional" are usually presented in contrast to terms that represent the scholars' research aims, namely how "modern" or "Western" their subjects are. For example, Smith and Inkeles (1966) defined "modern" as a "set of attitudes and values, and ways of feeling and acting, presumably of the sort either generated by or required for participation in a modern society..." (1966:353). Similarly, the African scholars surveyed give much attention to and examples of African "traditions" and "traditional African culture", yet seldom if ever clearly define the terms. For the sake of clarity and the general purposes of this paper, and as an expression of what I understand the general definition of the term to mean to the African scholars I have cited, I have employed the following working definition of "traditional African culture": generally widespread sub-Saharan African core values, beliefs, cultural themes and behaviors as they existed prior to European contact; and as they still

exist, especially in the rural areas and to a lesser extent in the urban areas of Africa; and upon which many, if not most, fundamental thought processes and behaviors of contemporary sub-Saharan Africans are based and continue to be derived from.

(3) See for example the works of Biesheuval (1954), Smith and Inkeles (1966), Dawson (1964 and 1967), Doob (1967), Kahl (1968), Hoogvelt (1974), and Gough (1975 and 1976).

(4) Most of the African scholars' works cited in this paper have not come from social scientists. African scholars I have spoken with believe the lack of social science involvement in this area of research is due, in large part, to an inadequacy of resources in African university social science departments to support indigenous social research. They also believe it is due to the generally oppressive nature of post-independence African central governments when it comes to academics and their students studying and exposing various social ills, including government corruption, incompetence and criminality. (Kenyan philosopher Masolo argues that this "suppression of knowledge and the resultant brain-drain remain Africa's foremost cause of underdevelopment and sociopolitical instability" [1995:50]. Therefore, since the mid-1960s, African scholars in philosophy, history, and education have made greater strides in this area than their colleagues in the social sciences primarily because central governments have seen them as engaging in "academic" or "purely intellectual" pursuits, as a result, less threatening to the status quo than are social scientists. African governments, therefore, have allowed scholars other than social scientists greater intellectual freedom of expression.

(5) The African scholars focused on in this paper include the following: Senegalese Leopold Senghor (1963 and 1966); Ghanaians G. K. Osei (1971) and Kwame Gyekye (1988 and 1996); Kenyans John S. Mbiti (1969 and 1992), Kihumbu Thairu (1975), J. M. Nyasani (1997); and South Africans Augustine Shutte (1993) and M. W. Makgoba (1997). The selected works of these writers span a period of thirty-five years and come from three of Africa's major sub-regions - West, East and Southern--where the largest number of contemporary African scholars have intellectually pursed the issues associated with pan-African cultural and psychological traits and adaptive processes. As such, the selections are regarded to represent serious and significant scholarly efforts on the part of Africans to describe and/or analyze pan-African cultural and psychological traits and widespread patterns and processes of African cultural adaptation. Other key African works and commentary discussed or cited in the paper include Mazrui and Mazrui (1995), D. A. Masolo (1995) and Philip Ochieng (1998). Still other important works by African scholars addressing these topics should have have also included in the review but were omitted due to their not being readily available to the author in Africa when this project began. These include H. Olela (1971 and 1984), C. A. Diop (1974), P. Hountondji (1983), Kwame Appiah (1987 and 1992), V. Y. Mudimbe (1988), Kwasi Wiredu (1990 and 1992), Yoweri Museveni (1992 and 1997) and others. Finally, a number of other important works published during the past twenty years by contemporary African scholars offering analyses and solutions to Africa's current political and socioeconomic problems were available to the author and were reviewed and considered for inclusion. However, they were excluded from the paper because they make little or no reference to pan-African culture and personality traits or patterns and processes of African cultural adaptation. These include: P. M. Mutibwa (1977), Gideon S. Were (1983 and 1992), R. I. Onwuka and A. Sesay (1985), Philip Ndegwa (1985 and 1986), Thomas R. Odhiambo (1988), P. Anyang' Nyong'o (1990 and 1992), Thabo Mbeki (1995), Eric M. Aseka (1996), and others. In limiting the scope of this paper to the works of scholars from Africa I am not discounting the efforts of Western scholars such as Aidan Campbell (1997), Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger (1996), Verena Stolcke (1995) and Eric Wolf (1994), for example, who continue to make significant contributions to the study of African and non-African ethnicity and individual and group identity. I have simply 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.
(6) See for example Vilakazi (1979), Decalo (1980) and Lassiter (1983) regarding Swazi and Batswana secondary school students and university graduates.
(7) The reference to "violence stemming from tribalism" is also noteworthy. Ethnically defined conflict is a symptom not a cause. It is fomented and used by individuals and groups seeking wealth and/or political power. It does not arise inherently, as the writer and many others imply, from ethnicity or ethnic values, identity, loyalty or behavior.
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Abstract: Western social scientists abandoned typical personality and national character studies during the 1960s. However, many sub-Saharan African scholars in various disciplines, those resident on the continent and elsewhere, have continued to identify, describe and make use of what they consider to be widespread African psychological characteristics and patterns of cultural adaptation. These include core African cultural values and themes, and what the scholars believe are common African responses to the requirements of social life and external cultural influences. To them, the analysis and use of these widely shared values, themes and adaptive responses are crucial for achieving viable and sustainable African national and community development. In fact, a number of the thinkers argue this endeavor is necessary for the ultimate survival of Africa and its cultures. In contrast, Western and non-Western social scientists have given up pursuing such broad concepts and adaptive processes as areas of invalid and/or harmful social science inquiry. This paper attempts to identify and assess the nature, range, quality, and utility of research and writing by selected African scholars on African culture and personality and recurring African responses to indigenous social life and Western acculturation. It does so by reviewing and analyzing a sampling of writings by African scholars published since the mid-1960s. Generally, the paper asks: What are African scholars, commentators and the public, saying about Africa's various ethnicities and Africanness and why is it important to them? The feasibility of applying such understandings to the socioeconomic conditions and practical problems of contemporary African societies is also examined. In terms of social science theory

and methodology, the paper offers justification for reinstating within anthropology, and more specifically ethnology, the study of African and non-African core values, cultural themes and patterns of response to social needs and external cultural forces. Finally, the contrast between the approaches of social scientists and the African scholars surveyed is discussed in the context of the historical shift in the social sciences from generalization to particularism; and, more broadly, in the context of the rise and dominance of individualism over communalism in the global community.

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