

African Culture and Personality: A Comment on James E. Lassiter

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The last two decades of the nineteen hundreds witnessed a pleasing upsurge in African scholarship, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. This upsurge signaled a significant shift in African studies that saw African scholars take leading discursive roles. It also shifted the nature and direction of African studies as African and Africanist scholars expanded the discursive scope through interactions across disciplines. This development was enabled by a critical dialectic whose moments are at times fair, congenial and complementary, but at other times also not quite so fair, congenial or complementary. As often occurs in academic endeavors, there have been both good and bad products, as well as good and bad criticisms. James E. Lassiter's essay, "African Culture and Personality: Bad Social Science, Effective Social Activism, or a Call to Reinvent Ethnology?", is an example of very bad criticism of some aspects of recent African scholarship.

Lassiter argues that the pollution of the social sciences in African studies is occurring mainly as a result of the freelance attitude and practice by African scholars, especially when influential scholars venture into and use concepts from disciplinary fields they have only little or no knowledge of. The result, he argues, is devastating to the integrity and growth of a tradition of scientific and respectable African social studies. He picks out a handful of works by scholars from the East and South Africa for a demonstration of the extent of this devastation. In particular, he names Kihumbu Thairu and Joseph Nyasani, two Kenyan scholars, a medical doctor and philosopher respectively, who, in his view, have ventured into discussions of what they claim to be African cultural traits (for example what they claim to be the African psyche or African personality) with total neglect of and aberration from the noble rules and methods of ethnographic studies set in place by Western cultural and social anthropologists. The result of this regulatory and methodological aberration is that "such inquiry [becomes] no more than unscientific stereotyping, usually with malevolent intent and effect." (Lassiter, p.2).

Let me surprise my readers by saying that there are points I tend to agree with Lassiter on. But such points are few and far apart compared to those I severely differ with him on. I will explain as I go along. I agree that the claims made by Thairu and Nyasani are harmfully general. Yet they are part of a much wider tradition of literature which Lassiter, perhaps only conveniently, chooses to leave out of his discussion. Although he points out correctly that part of this kind of literature is liberatory and anti-colonial, Lassiter fails to connect it to the ethnophilosophical movement in the United States which is descended partly from the ethnophilosophical and Afrocentric movement in the United States which is descended partly from ethnophilosophy and Janheinz Jahn's cultural pan-Africanism on one hand, and partly from the Pan-Africanist movement in the strict political sense, on the other. Taken together, the

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mistake of the African or African-American scholars in the heart of this discourse on cultural Pan-Africanism does not lie in the fact that they discuss African culture. 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. Their weakness, in my view, lies in attributing differences of beliefs among peoples to biology rather than to experience. This biologization of culture appears at the core of Afrocentrism as practiced in the United States today, but its recent roots, as I mentioned above, are in the premises - both stated and implied by arguments - of ethnophilosophy. My position, which Lassiter cites in support of his critique of Nyasani, was taken against this collectivist and fossilizing genetic assumption about the nature of the minds of Africans which represents it as impervious to the dialects of experience. One is therefore able to detect a dangerous contradiction in Nyasani's thesis, and this brings me to another point against Lassiter: that he chooses particularly weak and clearly problematic publications by Africans which contextualize and amplify discussions on these issues; he also discusses his selections widely out of context. For example, failure to read Nyasani's text at least partly in relation to the rest of the history of African professional philosophy over the past seven decades makes it easy for Lassiter to accuse Nyasani of obfuscating the disciplinary boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities. To say the least, Lassiter's failure to take note of recent advances in anthropological discourse, and his failure to take advantage of readily available recent publications in African philosophy are utterly inexcusable, despite his attempt to hide behind a wide but unused list of reference texts. Mudimbe, Wiredu, Gyekye, and Appiah, to mention just a few, have all recently published excellent scholarly philosophical works which top lists of cogitative discussions of significant conceptual implications of changes African societies continue to undergo.

Lassiter accuses African scholars of failing to define their new (mis)uses of well established scientific terms. But his (p.3) swipe at Ali Mazrui does not indicate that his own critical understanding and practice is better. His highlight of the phrase "The new East African mind" in a passage quoted from Mazrui and Mazrui (1995:134) suggests that he is questioning the use of the term "mind" in the passage, but one sees no difficulty at all in the context of the entire passage. He also questions the use of the term "African Personality" from another passage of the same work. The said passage, it appears to me, refers to the historical evolution and affinity between the movements which the terms stand for. For Lassiter to suggest that Mazrui and Mazrui have in the passage misused a purely psychological term (personality) clearly indicates his ignorance of the historical genealogy of that term and others listed with it. Lassiter's objection indicates his serious misreading of both the intent and the context of the text. But even worse, it appears that Lassiter takes Mazrui's and Nyasani's respective uses of the term "mind" to be synonymous. If so, this is an indication of a gravely careless reading by someone wishing to present himself in such a critical manner.

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