

**A Critical Review of D.A. Masolo's *Self and
Community in a Changing World*, Bloomington and
Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010.
ISBN 978-0-253-35481-5 cloth \$75.00; ISBN 978-0-
253-22202-2 pbk \$ 24.95**

Reginald M.J. Oduor

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

University of Nairobi, Kenya

rmjoduor@gmail.com

Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)

New Series, Vol.4 No.1, June 2012, pp.1-24

thoughtandpractice@gmail.com

<http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index>

The renowned Kenyan philosopher, Prof. D.A. Masolo, currently teaching at the University of Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A., is much more than a historian of African philosophy: he is also a rigorous critic of current trends in the field. His latest book, *Self and Community in a Changing World*, explores the relationship between two concepts that have been the subject of socio-political philosophy for more than two millennia. The *American Heritage dictionary* tells us that “self” designates “The total, essential, or particular being of a person; the individual”. The same dictionary states that one of the meanings of the term “community” is “A group of people having common interests.” However, this latter definition is rather vague, and can be significantly aided by Heywood (2004), who notes that the term “community” usually suggests a group within which there are strong ties and a collective identity. A genuine community is therefore distinguished by the bonds of comradeship, loyalty and duty. In that sense, community refers to the social roots of individual identity (Heywood 2004, 33).

In his introduction (pp.1-15), Masolo states that one of the main goals of his book is to identify what he considers to be the key theory-oriented ideas and issues that have guided the recent history of African philosophy. He is quick to concede that consensus on common themes and on their articulation in African philosophy is difficult to arrive at, and is not even necessary. For him, what is important is the exchange of ideas among various historians of African philosophy, as such exchange is what keeps the discipline alive by encouraging debate. For him, the question of re-working and integrating indigenous knowledge into the new philosophical order runs through all the matters discussed in the book for the important reason that philosophy is always a specialized type of reflection on different aspects of everyday lives and experiences as well as on the presuppositions that drive them or on which they are built.

Philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge

In his first chapter, the author focuses on the question of the relationship between philosophy and indigenous knowledge. He points out that in a broad sense, the position a culture chooses on the relation between theory and reality, that is, between general explanations and observational data, is its center (p.17). He goes on to outline the changing usages of the term “indigenous”, from the meaning arrogated to it at the dawn of colonialism when it signified an otherness, to its current usage, where it expresses the shift towards pluralism. Masolo asserts that since Kuhn, the study of the nature of scientific theory has progressively blurred the lines among the sciences, humanities and social sciences, resulting in an enhanced understanding on all sides, and placing realism at the centre of the debate (p.23). For him, several factors account for the re-emergence of indigenous knowledge, among which are the evident degrading effects of Western industrialization on the environment, the end of the Cold War, and the subsequent motivation of Western governmental and non-governmental agencies to help poor countries to identify local solutions to their problems.

A discussion of indigenous knowledge in the African context would be incomplete if it did not address the question of ethnophilosophy, that is, the study of the thought of whole African communities as championed by Placide Tempels towards the middle of the last century (see Tempels 1959). Masolo claims that the debate about the place of ethnophilosophy initially seemed to pit African knowledge systems against philosophy as a specialist field of knowledge. According to him, what is important is

for intellectuals to reflect on how to create a present different from the past. This being so, the old distinctions between traditional and modern, indigenous and colonial disappear. Recognising the dictates of the present does not necessarily render the modes of expression of the indigenous system (such as the values of collective identity) obsolete, if these are properly defined and appropriately applied to the domains where they remain relevant and potent (pp.27-28). Masolo seeks to demonstrate that philosophical endeavours begin with the everyday, the familiar, which is part of the indigenous, as embedded in the locutions that bridge our relations with the external world around us, a claim long established in the ordinary language philosophy movement (p.31).

Masolo is passionate about the emancipation of African scholarship from Western dominance. He urges African scholars to find ways of financing their own academic endeavours, so that they can be free to discuss what is truly of concern to them and their people:

Africans will not change Africa if they depend on Western organizations to give them funds even to define what indigenous knowledge and indigenous development are or when they wait for Western organizations to pay them to meet with and tell each other (but also be told by the West) what they should be thinking about. Until Africans discard the attitude of dependency and until they transition to the point of defining their needs and funding their own initiatives, the definitions will remain primarily oriented toward donor boardrooms for the purpose of extracting per diem allowances and the elegant essays will remain little more than tools of personal convenience (p.34).

The author's challenge to African scholars to find ways of convening and sustaining their own debates is timely. Why is it that we must wait for some European foundation or government to convene a conference on African philosophy? It seems to me that this dependency is spawned by our failure to be creative. Why must a conference be held in a five-star hotel with conference bags and T-shirts to boot if we cannot afford it? Why not simply reserve a conference room in one of our universities, present our papers, deliberate on them, and then retreat to our simple private accommodations? Why not use the Internet to convene international conferences, thereby circumventing the need for costly air tickets? Why not use the Internet to publish more high quality journals under the Open Access model - a model which is

much more affordable for both the publisher and reader, and whose reach is much more expansive than the traditional journal in print?

In the endeavour to achieve intellectual decolonization, some African thinkers have advocated for the use of African languages in scholarly endeavours. In the mid 1970s, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the celebrated Kenyan novelist and playwright, ventured into writing his works in Gikuyu, so that the English renderings of them would be translations. Is this a worthwhile venture in philosophy? While conceding the obvious difficulties of communication across the approximately 1700 African linguistic communities, Masolo is of the view that writing philosophy in African languages should still be done for two reasons: to encourage local debate about the understanding and interpretation of indigenous concepts and theories, and to preserve these thought expressions in their original renditions (p.44).

Another important question in the debate on the nature of African philosophy has been that of the place of written philosophical texts. In the 1970s and 1980s, the prolific Beninese philosopher, Paulin J. Hountondji, had asserted that African philosophy is constituted by "a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves" (Hountondji 1983, 33), and "a literature produced by Africans and dealing with philosophical problems" (Hountondji 1983, 63). Hountondji's idea seemed to be that philosophy grows through written works, and that no work of philosophy can begin from the orally transmitted wisdom of a people. In contrast to this position, Masolo subscribes to the view that works of African philosophers who base the gist of their reflections on their cultures teaches us that "all philosophy, not just African philosophy, is embedded in culture by virtue of the observation that philosophical problems stem from and are part of how philosophers consciously and critically live the cultures of their times. Similarly, in contemporary Africa, just like everywhere else, everyday beliefs and practices of ordinary people continue to mingle with the specialized (carefully considered and sifted) beliefs and knowledge of the professionals" (p.50).

Philosophy and the Orders of Consciousness

In his second chapter, Prof. Masolo examines the relationship between philosophy as

an academic discipline and the orders of consciousness. Continuing and extending from the previous chapter the discussion on the relevance of indigenous thought systems to the philosophical enterprise, he sets out by stating that “The emphasis on content and methodology in philosophical traditions can be traced to circumstances that identify how different peoples of the world have striven to manage their cultures and their histories. In that sense, such emphases bear the marks of indigeneity, meaning that they are indicators of the ways that people think differently about the world” (p.51).

The author goes on to point out that with the attainment of political independence in Asian and African countries, “... the striving is no longer the search for the elusive universal but a search for the integration of diversity—including diversity in knowledge—into the common forum for learning” (p.51). This is to say that the view gaining wide currency is that different cultures have their own unique ways of acquiring and using knowledge, so that the globalised human society must accommodate the various cultural perspectives in this regard. This development has made it possible to ask pertinent questions about the distinct characteristics of African modes of knowledge. Masolo identifies the following as some of the most common questions in this regard: “How do African people think differently from other people and what are those differences? What do they stem from? Or do we differ at all?” (p.51). For Masolo, the question of the idea and reality of personhood has been central to debate among African philosophers: “... is there, and what is, our model of a person? And what, in our value systems, do aspects of such a model point to that are different from other value systems elsewhere?” (p.52).

Masolo characterizes the core of recent debates in African philosophy as that of reconciling the indigenous orders of knowledge with the orders of philosophical knowledge, a matter with regard to which Paulin J. Hountondji is one of the most insistent and the most recognized of contemporary African philosophers, besides also being one of the most controversial (P.52). Masolo looks at what has happened in the scene of African philosophy since Hountondji’s most noted work, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, was first published in English in 1983 (p.53). The publication had made the philosophers in the former English colonies aware of Hountondji’s thoroughgoing criticism of the work of Placide Tempels and that of

African scholars who had subscribed to Tempels' model of studying and defining African philosophy. For me one of the most memorable passages in Hountondji's critique of what he calls ethnophilosophy is the following:

Ethnophilosophy can now be seen in its true light. Because it has to account for an imaginary unanimity, to interpret a text which nowhere exists and has to be constantly reinvented, it is a science without an object, a 'crazed language' accountable to nothing, a discourse that has no referent, so that its fallacy can never be demonstrated. Tempels can then maintain that for the Bantu being is power, and Kagame can beg to differ: We have no means of settling the quarrel (Hountondji 1983, 62).

For Hountondji, both Tempels and Kagame simply make use of African traditions and oral literature, and project on to them their own philosophical beliefs, hoping thereby to enhance their credibility (Hountondji 1983, 62).

Several African scholars objected to Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy, accusing him of scientism, elitism and Occidentalism. As Masolo explains, Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy had some excesses that appeared to leave no room for a positive engagement with the ordinary or everyday experiences and knowledge articulations of local peoples. It gave the impression that philosophy was the opposite of the "ordinary" rather than its clarification, be it analytically or synthetically (p.61). This prompted Hountondji to write a new preface to the second edition of the English translation of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, published in 1996, in response to some of the criticisms. As Masolo explains, both the preface to the second edition and his other recent work help clarify that Hountondji is not - and he explains that he never was - an enemy of Africa's indigenous knowledge systems, as was misleadingly assumed by most of those who did not like his critique of ethnophilosophy. Indeed, he has lately become one of the strongest and most visible and audible defenders of indigenous knowledges. His point is that in most areas indigenous knowledges are in dire need of critical jump starts (p.59). Masolo goes on to observe that in another of Hountondji's more recent publications, *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa* (2002), Hountondji asserts that humans constitute a plurality of subjects that are not reducible to the anonymous chorus of the crowd that both ethnophilosophy and the totalitarian political discourse of post-independence dictators preferred (Masolo, p.83).

Masolo also points out that concurrently with the ethnophilosophy debate, another controversy, ignited by Thomas Kuhn's work on the theoretical nature and historical character of scientific knowledge, most notably in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), was brewing over whether or not knowledge generally, and scientific theory in particular, was free of the influence of everyday human aspirations, beliefs, endeavors, and compromises (Masolo, pp.59-60). He goes on to note that some of Kuhn's adherents have now popularised the view that scientific knowledge is of necessity an aspect of local knowledge, and Hountondji now has embraced this view (Masolo, p.60). According to Masolo, what Hountondji had said about philosophy as a body of literature must now be re-interpreted to accommodate oral literature and oral philosophical expressions (p.60).

In a nutshell, Masolo makes it clear that as a successful response to critics, Hountondji's preface to his second edition of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* establishes itself and repositions the entire text as a new terminus in the discursive process, thus pointing in the very direction that Hountondji's original critique of ethnophilosophy had suggested as the proper nature of philosophical practice, that is, a discursive activity rather than an established body of truths (Masolo, p.59).

Masolo himself manifests a critical approach to African philosophy when he compares the works of Hountondji with those of one of the most well known champions of the concept of African identity, namely, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Those who were opposed to Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy frequently saw the thought of Senghor as a more appropriate response to Western domination. However, Masolo points out that in Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy, he followed Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, while Senghor's Negritude was inspired by an anti-Cartesian current in France, headed famously by Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenology, and also illustrated by the works of Henri Bergson. According to Masolo, Senghor's expressions of the epistemological uniqueness of Negritude closely adopt the vocabulary of Bergson. Consequently, Masolo suggests that Hountondji's critics would need to show that it is more African to subscribe to Sartre or Bergson rather than to Husserl, all of whom are European thinkers (p.93).

Masolo also manifests a reflective approach to the African worldview in his own critique of Senghor. It will be recalled that Senghor asserted, controversially, that while Europeans tend to be predominantly analytic in their thinking, Africans are distinctively emotional. Masolo offers an interesting response to this position: “In the absence of ... additional and racially specific biological attributes that would validate Senghor’s theory, one would have to infer that Senghor did not consider black Africans to be exactly normal human beings, either because they lack something other humans have or because they have something additional to everything else that they share with other humans. It has never been clear which of these options serves his purpose” (p.94). This matter arises again later in chapter four of the book under the related discussion of the nature of mind, and of personhood more generally, in the works of Kwasi Wiredu.

Revaluation of Values and the Demand for Liberties

In the third chapter, the author undertakes thoroughgoing reflection on the tension between the freedom of the individual and the authority of society. While this problematic is not new, Masolo’s reflection on it is undertaken within the contemporary African context with its communalistic orientation coupled with the spread of liberal views about individual human rights. He asserts that the adage that “the unexamined life is not worth living” holds the key to an exit from traditions and customs of unwarranted misery and suffering for many who are trapped in political and cultural persecutions (p.103). Among the dehumanising experiences that are of greatest concern to the author are pre-arranged child marriages and painful rites of passage (pp.107-109). Masolo is passionate about the need to divest African traditions of their unfettered power over individuals: “The assumption that tradition has its own criteria for what qualifies as moral right and wrong outside the jurisdiction of basic human rights is one that is likely to make it possible for those who are privileged by a traditional power system to think of and to treat those who are dispossessed of such powers in the same way they treat their cattle and other possessions” (p.117).

The author further notes that despite political independence in African countries, former liberators have turned out to be oppressors. Similarly, village elders continue

to oppress women and children (pp.104-105). He uses the Epilogue to Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, which records the way in which Kwame's clan conducted the burial of his father in ways that violated the dead man's stated wishes, to demonstrate his point (p.105 ff.). Nevertheless, he is quick to add that communalist and liberal values are not necessarily mutually exclusive (p.107). Yet he still concedes that "..., the idea that the metaphysics of individual identity is almost unimaginable without a community to make it possible is a crucial and distinguishing point of contrast between African and other philosophical traditions, especially the Western variety" (p.134).

Masolo is against the version of liberalism led by Martha Nussbaum of the University of Chicago, which views identity claims based on factors such as ethnicity and nationality as a hindrance to the full enjoyment of individual liberties. Masolo agrees with Nussbaum that human rights are of necessity universal. Indeed, the anti-colonial struggle was premised on the universality of human rights (Masolo, p.124). Nevertheless, he points out that the effort to dispense with people's cultural identity is likely to be offensive especially to people who have had to wage wars to reclaim their cultural freedom interwoven with their political independence (p.121). This is reminiscent of the position of the Canadian political philosopher, Charles Taylor (1994), that the so-called difference-blind approach to politics tends to negate the identity of groups by forcing people into a homogeneous mold that is untrue to them. Minority cultures are then 'forced to take alien form', that of the dominant culture. Thus for Taylor, the supposedly fair and difference-blind society is not only 'inhuman' (by suppressing identities), but also 'highly discriminatory' against minority cultures.

Nevertheless, Masolo is deeply concerned about the repressive character of culture. He makes the important observation that "No aspect of culture, however noble, is an end unto itself" (p.122). Furthermore, he observes that at the political level, oppression is not always perpetrated by foreigners. The slowness of African governments to repeal laws that are oppressive to women and to work towards the abolition of repugnant cultural practices is of great concern to Masolo (pp.129-130). He also outlines ways in which Islam and Christianity are slowing down the actualization of liberal ideals in African society: Christian missionaries supported

colonialism; churchmen have supported African dictators, and aligned their requirements to oppressive indigenous cultural elements (pp.124-125).

Understanding Personhood: An African Philosophical Anthropology

In Chapter Four, Masolo examines Kwasi Wiredu's treatment of the notion of "the person". He points out that for Wiredu, the idea of the person is the pinnacle of an African difference in philosophical theory (p.135-137). According to Masolo, "By articulating the premetaphysical social genesis of the individual and his or her dependence on others for self-actualization, African philosophers have contributed significantly to the establishment of an alternative normative standpoint for viewing the world from a communalist rather than the individualist perspective, and no one accomplishes this task nearly as well as Kwasi Wiredu does" (pp.139-140). According to Masolo, not only is Wiredu's African idea of self or the person different and interesting, it also subverts familiar notions in epistemology and metaphysics such as the nature of truth, mind, abstract ideas, God, spirit and life after death. Furthermore, it leads us to a different understanding of the basis of moral universals (p.141 ff.).

Masolo guides his readers through the main elements of Wiredu's view of personhood. He explains that in a view that sharply subverts the popularly believed African dualism, Wiredu contends that the physical world with its capacities is all there is as the primary basis of all nature; everything else either springs from physical reality as its mode of behavior or is metaphorically imagined on the basis of similarities with or differences from the physical world (Masolo, p.141). Masolo is detailed in his explication, demonstrating the similarities and differences between Wiredu and some prominent Western philosophers such as John Locke, Gilbert Ryle and John Dewey.

The author explains that whether it is cast in the idealistic mode of Plato or in the Aristotelian idioms of the collaboration of the different substances of being, dualism has, until recently, represented the pinnacle of Western metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and psychology, frequently only modifying the nature of the collaboration between matter and nonmaterial substances, or force. African thought, on the other

hand, especially in Wiredu's interpretation, sees nature primarily in its physical sense and fundamentally recognizes the various capacities or dispositions of the body according to its various specifications. Human nature in particular is accorded great attention in African thought (Masolo, pp.151-152).

Some Western thinkers have advocated materialism, insisting that all human experiences can be accounted for solely in terms of the human being as a physical entity (see for example Hobbes 1904). Indeed, despite its initial association in the 1930s with logical positivism's emphasis on language in the work of Otto Neurath and Rudolf Carnap (See Carnap 1959 and Neurath 1983), the term "physicalism" is now increasingly used interchangeably with "materialism". As Daniel Stoljar (2009) explains in a somewhat circular but still useful way, "Physicalism is the thesis that everything is physical, or as contemporary philosophers sometimes put it, that everything supervenes on, or is necessitated by, the physical." Several Western philosophers of mind are of the view that physicalism implies the mind/brain identity theory, which holds that states and processes of the mind are identical to states and processes of the brain (Smart 2007).

Wiredu is uncomfortable with thoroughgoing physicalism and the associated mind/brain identity theory. As Masolo explains, Wiredu adopts a quasi-physicalist brand of monism according to which the existence of mind is not denied but is defined as an integral and essential or inalienable aspect of the ways that the normal (fully developed and healthy) human organism functions. Just as the bright light emitted by a light bulb is neither identical to nor exists independently of the wires on which it depends for its "existence", so the mind is neither identical with nor exists independently of the materiality of the brain that makes it possible, and it would be unsatisfactory to conclude only that it is physical like those things on which it necessarily depends or it must be an entity of a completely different, opposed (i.e., nonphysical) nature. Rather, the mind is the natural function of the relations between the parts of the brain that respond to certain stimuli whenever certain conditions obtain (Masolo, pp.165-166).

Masolo explains that for Wiredu, communication is an inevitable circumstance of the occurrence of thought and therefore an essential means by which we become persons,

not just human beings (p.153). According to Wiredu, mind would not be possible without communication. Communication, he says, “makes the mind” (cited in Masolo, p.155). Thus Masolo explains that for Wiredu, by means of communicative interaction we become more than just human beings: we become persons (p.142). As such, humans who are deprived - by impairment, for example - of the ability to communicate are deprived of something fundamental to their nature, namely full participation in the world of persons (Masolo, p.165). Further, “Being a person and being a human being are not the same thing. We are human beings by virtue of the particular biological organism that we are. Our biological type defines us as a species among other living things, and it involves, among other things, having the kind of brain that we possess and all the activities that this kind of brain is naturally endowed to perform” (Masolo, p.154). On the other hand, “... we become persons through acquiring and participating in the socially generated knowledge of norms and actions that we learn to live by in order to impose humaneness upon our humanness” (Masolo, p.155). In a nutshell, Masolo explains that for Wiredu, human beings are born, but persons are socially cultivated (p.174).

In addition, Masolo asserts that in the light of its nonmonadological view of human nature, Wiredu’s *Cultural Universals and Particulars* provides a defining and grounding framework for African modes of thought. It poses the fundamental question that could be re-framed as follows: What would the philosophical theories as we have been made to know them (through a Western-oriented training in philosophy) look like if one were to change the basic underlying sociological assumption - the category of the (individualistic) subject—upon which they are built? The author explains that the backdrop of this question is what Wiredu refers to as the “radically un-Kantian concept of the person” in African thought (Masolo, p.158). Masolo observes that this radically un-Kantian person would undertake philosophical reflection within the context of communal existence along the following lines:

He or she would reflect on metaphysics in terms of the relationships among living things.

His or her epistemology would account for the acquisition of knowledge in terms of a communal venture (p.176, 180).

He or she would justify moral principles solely in terms of their benefit to persons as members of society (p.172).

He or she would consider spirits to be “entities” only in a metaphorical sense (p.167), so that he would regard immortality as a false consequence of the view that posits mind, and whatever else is thought to accompany mind, to be “entities” that heave off from the body at death (pp.169-170).

Prof. Masolo goes on to explain that for Wiredu, intrinsic to cognition from the point of view of a purely biological endowment specific to humans, are the formal laws by which we organize beliefs. According to Wiredu, we are organisms that go beyond instinct in the drive for equilibrium and self-preservation in specific ways, namely, by means of reflective perception, abstraction, deduction, and induction. Wiredu asserts that these laws are intrinsic to or are ingrained in the nature of mind and organize the structure of thought (Masolo, p.175). However, in view of Wiredu’s theory of truth as opinion, a critic could ask him if what he says about the laws of thought is also an opinion.

The Luo Concept of *Juok* as the Moral Foundation of Personhood

In his fifth chapter, Masolo examines the Luo concept of *juok* as the moral foundation of personhood. He is of the view that indigenous concepts of personhood are often unhelpfully shrouded in mythical, allegorical or proverbial terminologies that conceal the direct and clear meanings that were intended for them. Nevertheless, many anthropologists have simply reported the figures of speech without undertaking indepth analyses of their meanings. Similarly, persons from the various African communities who are aware of the real signification of the figurative language have been unwilling to explicate it in the name of guarding the secrets of their circles of experts (p.182).

Masolo is of the view that in defining *juok* as soul or spirit, B.A. Ogot and Okot p’Bitek, two renowned Luo scholars, “were influenced and driven by the then-popular missionary search for African cosmological entities to imitate the cosmological order of the dominant Christian culture. This domination reordered indigenous patterns of thought by denying them the status of independent apprehensions and conceptualizations” (p.185). In p’Bitek’s examination of the Luo concept of *jok*, he

“Inadvertently, ..., began by unquestioningly accepting the category of religion as a helpful tool for analyzing and organizing Acholi thought, even though he disagreed with the earlier missionary and anthropological positions ...“ (p.190). On its part, Ogot’s analysis of the concept of *juok* as the vital force is influenced by Tempels’ assertions about the vital force in Bantu thought (p.196). Thus in contrast to Ogot and p’Bitek, Masolo argues that linguistic evidence suggests that *juok* is a moral concept that seeks to idealize social virtues rather than a metaphysical one that describes the nature of entities (p.185 ff.).

Prof. Masolo rejects the European anthropologists’ assertion that the Luo believed in a dualistic cosmos in terms of heaven and earth (pp.188-189). He proceeds to conduct an incisive analysis of the use of the Luo term *piny* (down or earth) to show that for the Luo, the dead do not “go to heaven” as the Christian missionaries taught (p.190 ff.). He summarises that discussion as follows:

It is clear from these accounts of the meanings of the concept *piny* (as world, earth, authority, or universe) that it is not always thought of as being lower or less than anything else. Rather, in a human-centered consideration of the complexity of life and its travails, there might not be another place to look for an ideal prototype. Humans can only refer to their genealogies to recover lessons that sustain social stability (p.195).

Masolo seeks to demonstrate that *juok* has several shades of interrelated meanings, although all of them lie at the center of social and moral thought. Two of these are particularly instructive.

First, *juok* refers to a name given to an individual as his or her “official” or ritual family name from the maternal or paternal side of his or her ancestry. This helps to prevent marriage among people with common ancestry, and provides individuals with the means for articulating their personhood (p.196). Masolo makes the thought-provoking observation that while the missionaries forbade Africans from taking up their ancestors’ names, they encouraged them to take up the names of European and Jewish ancestors: “Even today African converts are encouraged, even by their fellow African churchmen and churchwomen, to pray to the European and Jewish dead whose names they bear to intercede for them when they want favors from god. But praying to one’s own clan ancestors amounted to ancestor worship and was therefore

prohibited” (p.197).

Second, in the social and moral senses, *juok* refers to an anti-social attitude and character. A form of behavior is branded as *juok* if it is intentionally aimed at harming others or if it is intentionally weird and out of line with expectations of reasonableness toward other people and/or things, or when it is determined to have been well calculated to cause some form of harm or unpleasant experience to other persons (p.199). Furthermore, “When one is called *jajuok*, moral blame is implied. It is assumed that the person has freely chosen to behave in that manner and that he or she continues to freely decide to do so” (p.200). Indeed, sharp distinctions are made between *Jajuok* on the one hand, and people who are mentally sick or possessed by spirits on the other: the latter two are exempted from moral culpability (p.200).

Many contemporary Luos, particularly those who live in urban areas and only occasionally visit their ancestral rural homes, associate the word *jajuok* with a person who runs around peoples homesteads in the dead of night causing paralysing fear. Masolo corrects this misconception by pointing out that the idea and practice of calling a night-runner *jajuok* derives from the more general moral connotation of the term (p.201). Another form of behavioral *juok* is believed to be practiced by individuals who use a variety of means, all of which are classifiable under the general category of “magic and witchcraft”, to cause real harm to their victims. The *jajuok* of this category can be a *janawi*, a *jandagla*, a *jasihoho*, a *jabilo*, or a *jatung*’ (pp.201-202).

Consequently, Masolo asserts that “Contrary to older interpretations, especially those influenced by Tempels, ..., there are different senses of the term *juok* that are not reductively reconcilable under one concept. To claim that *juok* is a kind of ‘force’ in Tempels’s sense is tantamount to claiming that all the senses of the term (as ancestral names, as the mischievous actions of the night-runner or *juog yido*, and as the magical powers of the *janawi*, *jandagla*, *jabilo*, *jasihoho*, and *jatung*’) ... share a single basic or root meaning. Such a position claims, for example, that *juok* is a ‘power’ that enables people who act in those capacities to do so. Two problems arise from this claim. First is the universal extension of the attribute to everything, *à la* Tempels. Second, if *juok* was a metaphysical attribute, then calling someone a *jajuok* would not amount to an

accusation, and anyone who was called that would not take offense. But, ordinarily people do take offense when they are described as being *jajuok* because the description is understood to imply culpability for conduct associated with the trait” (p.202).

It is my view that on the issue of *juok* as antisocial behaviour, it would have been helpful if Masolo had sought to answer the question of the real motivation of those designated as such. For example, what is it that causes a person to want to run around another’s compound at night causing fear and despondency? How do we account for the powerful urge to leave the comfort of one’s home to go and disturb the peace and rest of neighbours who are usually also his or her kinsmen and kinswomen? What motivates such a person to tame a wild animal for his or her antisocial nocturnal escapades?

The author goes on to examine *Juok* in relation to the English idea of “soul” (p.210 ff.). He asserts that “The analysis of *juok* reveals that the concept includes neither nonphysical substances that operate independently of physical reality in the general sense, nor a nonphysical constituting substance that complements the physical nature of humans” (p.210). He goes on to note that “The term ‘*juok*’ (or its English version, ‘evil’) is a nonsubstantive noun and implies only that from a moral perspective, we recognize and classify some experiences to be qualitatively bad or unpleasant. But they are not objects or any other form of substance” (p.210).

For Masolo, in terms of the ontological constitution of personhood, Dholuo provides all the indications of materialism and none of dualism. The Luo attribute the sustenance of life to *chuny*, the kernel of biological life. Every organic thing has *chuny*. It makes plants germinate and grow, and it is responsible for the organic functioning of animals, including humans. *Chuny* is just as responsible for the pulse as it is for the growth and use of limbs and other biological organs. Thus a living cockroach has no less *chuny* than a living dog or living human, and no more than a living plant (pp.210-211). Masolo goes on to explicate other contexts in which the term *chuny* is used, chiefly in reference to emotional states and cognitive capacities, and insists that in none of them does *chuny* refer to a substance or an attribute of all things, but is rather a complex term that describes a variety of physical and

psychological states in living organisms when their ability to respond to stimuli are manifest. *Chuny* also means “center,” “key,” or some other indicator of the core of something such that other aspects of the thing can be identified only as peripheral (pp.211-212).

However, says Masolo, the European missionaries gave *chuny* a new meaning. They restricted its meaning to something called “soul,” which had hitherto not been part of the metaphysical or psychological vocabulary in Dholuo (p.212). What is more, “In a general way, the Luo appear to believe that something in the nature of persons survives the death of the body. Whatever it is that survives, the Luo appear not to have a term for it that might betray what they think to be its nature” (p.212). Consequently, some Luo now talk of the shadow (*tipo*) of the dead person going to heaven (*polo*), but this again is incompatible with Luo thought, which sees *tipo* in physical terms (pp.213-214). Furthermore, “although it is said at death that someone’s *chuny* is ‘disconnected’ (*chunye chot*), this does not imply the heaving off of a thing or a part thereof from another thing. It simply means that life has stopped, as the flow of electric current stops when there is a break or disconnection in the wiring. The energy is not ‘separated’ in the sense of being carried away toward an existence that is separate from the wires that carried it when it was present. Rather, its flow has been interrupted and, electrically speaking, the wires have ‘become dead’, in contrast to their ‘live’ status when connection allowed the flow of current” (p.215).

Prof. Masolo goes on to examine the various terms used in Dholuo to refer to the act of knowing, with the aim of determining how consciousness and selfhood are related and what further light they may shed on the idea of the person (pp.214-215). Thinking, or thought, is called *paro*, which is done in two different ways: *paro gi chuny* (thinking inside or to oneself, that is, introspection) and *paro gi wich* (thinking in the head, that is, considering something external to thought) (p.214).

In contrast to Ogot’s assertion about the centrality of *juok* in the Luo understanding of personhood, Masolo asserts that at no time do the everyday uses of concepts such as *chuny*, *tipo* and *paro* evoke or even remotely refer to the notion of *juok*. If *juok* was indeed the basic metaphysical “stuff” of being human, one would expect some mention of it in reference to the inner operations of personhood that these latter terms

address (p.215).

What about all those rituals that the Luo engage in to ensure that they are in good standing with the dead? Do they not indicate that the Luo believed in life after death? Masolo's answer is committedly naturalistic: such rituals are the means by which members of a community deal with their own guilty conscience in the face of calamities that result in the death of their kin (p.217). Seen in this light, the messages of a medium are simply the actions of a community seeking to assert its place through an interpretation of its past (pp.219-220). Earlier on he had asserted that the Luo believe that the dead continue to linger "somewhere" after death and continue to interact with family. But because this "lingering somewhere" is not meant literally, if someone were to claim that they "saw" an ancestor, however well regarded he or she might have been in life, the claim would quickly be taken as a sign of a mental degradation on the part of the claimant (p.196).

Masolo is emphatic that personhood is not constituted of metaphysical parts that only make people human. Rather, in addition to human capacities, personhood is constituted by the various roles people play in making community real; individuals and communities regulate and depend on each other for who and what they become (p.218).

The salient feature of Chapters 4 and 5 is the naturalistic interpretation of Akan culture by Wiredu and Luo culture by Masolo respectively. Indeed, more than thirty years ago, Wiredu had declared that one of the greatest obstacles to development in Africa is supernaturalism (Wiredu 1980, 5-6). However, a number of questions arise from Wiredu's and Masolo's naturalistic approach. Is their assertion that reality is purely physical not unjustifiably absolutist? How would we know if there is reality beyond the physical realm? Is it not more philosophically sound to concede that such a reality, if it exists, is beyond our perception and thus to suspend judgment on it? What about the failure of the logical positivists' verifiability principle? It will be recalled that logical positivism asserted that the only meaningful statements are those which refer directly to aspects of the physical world, and which can therefore be verified or falsified by the use of the five senses. The only exception to this rule were tautological statements such as "A green house is green." However, the logical

positivists ran into serious trouble when they were asked if their basic tenet was empirically verifiable or logically consistent: it was neither, and so it too was meaningless. Is Wiredu's and Masolo's physicalist position free from the same verdict?

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that both Wiredu and Masolo are avowed naturalists, and they go on to argue that based on careful conceptual examination and analysis of relevant elements in the cultural reservoirs of their respective people, the Akan and the Luo, especially as these elements are expressed in the respective languages and belief systems, only naturalistic perspectives emerge. These positions are bound to trigger further debate on the conceptual understanding or interpretation of the matters that they define and explain so differently from the popular or conventional assumptions about them. Interestingly already, other scholars - like Kwame Gyekye regarding interpretation of Akan thought, or B.A. Ogot and Okot p'Bitek on Luo thought - who are dualists have gone on to argue that the same communities have dualist orientations. This reminds me of Hountondji's accusation against Tempels and Kagame that they simply make use of African traditions and oral literature, and project on to them their own philosophical beliefs (Hountondji 1983, 62).

While Wiredu's and Masolo's linguistic analyses of relevant Akan and Luo terms respectively make for plausible presentations of their positions, their arguments are not watertight. For example, they both admit that their people believed that the dead continue to influence the living, but differ with the dualistic interpretation that takes such beliefs at face value. What is more, by insisting, as Masolo does, that African conceptions of personhood require interpretation to demystify their allegorical presentations, is to risk being in the same boat with Tempels who declared that "It is we [the European scholars] who will be able to tell them [Africans], in precise terms what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognise themselves in our words" (Tempels 1959, 36). While Masolo belongs to the Luo community whose beliefs he seeks to interpret, could it not be argued that his interpretation of Luo thought is one that most Luos would find difficult to identify with? Can an old man who participates in offering sacrifices to ancestors agree with Masolo that all that he (the old man) is doing is to assuage the pangs of his own conscience - that there really is no ancestor receiving the sacrifices?

Two Forms of Communitarianism: A Comparison

Having examined the conceptions of personhood in Akan and Luo thought in Chapters Four and Five respectively, In Chapter Six Masolo makes a comparison between African and Western communitarianism. This suggests that Chapters Four and Five focus on notions of the “self”, while Chapter Six interrogates those of “community”.

Masolo defines communitarianism as “the political view or ethic that developmental and participatory rather than liberal democracy is the most effective means for checking and containing aberrant policy and polity. It is developmental because its major concern is to forge avenues for the recognition of new rights, and it is participatory because in order to win such recognition, it depends not only on rational argumentation but also on collective political action as an inseparable means of pressing for these new rights, which, in turn, are collectively shared with others. Communitarianism, then, is the collectivist vision of a polity in its struggle for moral and other group goals” (p.245). Further, “In its moral definition, communitarianism exemplifies belief in the principle of practical altruism as an important social virtue” (p.246).

The author gives brief historical backgrounds of the two forms of communitarianism. Western communitarianism, he tells us, goes back to the work of the nineteenth century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who taught that the state has supreme intrinsic value that transcends the aspirations of the individuals who are part of it. According to Hegel, only in the state does the individual achieve freedom and self-fulfillment through participation in its transcendent life (Masolo, pp.222-224). Contemporary Western communitarians, especially the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, claim to continue this Hegelian sense of the individual as part of a larger whole within which he or she attains his or her freedom by means of an incarnation of a historically creative mind (Masolo, p.224).

Masolo goes on to explain that in Africa, the theoretical beginnings of

communitarianism are linked to the politics of independence from European colonialism, with some of the leading communitarian thinkers being Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. However, as an ethic of everyday life and social order it precedes recent African political and intellectual movements. Its expression can be found in many local idioms in African communities (p.246).

Although he sees some similarity between the critiques of individual autonomy in the writings of African and Western communitarians (p.253), Masolo is of the view that the two versions of communitarianism are markedly different. On the one hand, inspired by the effort to regulate the excesses of individualism, "..., Western communitarianism functions more as a watchdog for the common good than as a robust communitarian theory" (p.229). On the other hand, the African political leaders who championed communitarianism could refer to traditional social and political orders in different specific cultural manifestations to support their claims (pp.229-230).

The author is aware of both the potential benefits and dangers of communitarianism. He notes that the values and expectations of the communitarian ethic can be misunderstood or even abused, just as the liberties of the individual under liberalism have been (pp.249-250). Nevertheless, "Everyone is called upon and is expected to make a difference by contributing to the creation of the humane conditions that, at least, enhance the community's ability to reduce unhappiness and suffering" (p.250).

In most of his discussion, Masolo writes as though communalism and communitarianism are one and the same thing. However, at one point, he seems to identify African thinkers with communalism, and Western ones with communitarianism (p.240). In my view, this distinction in terminology should be promoted to distinguish the reaction of Western thinkers to the thoroughgoing individualism of their society (communitarianism) from the African thinkers' refinement of a social theory that draws rich insights from their cultural orientation (communalism).

In Lieu of a Conclusion

In a manner reminiscent of the Epilogue to Kwame Antony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, Masolo concludes his book with the presentation of a discussion held in his rural home between the author on the one hand, and his father and his father's peers on the other (p.255 ff.). He tells us that "At the center of this event was a dispute about whether, on what grounds, and when, a person should be obliged to observe *kwer* rituals (cleansing related to the death of a child)" (p.255). On the one hand, Masolo's father and those with him insist that in every case the individual is dutybound to defer to all the requirements of Luo ritual for the good of the home seen broadly as constituted of the dead, the living and those yet to be born. On the other hand, Masolo seeks to help his father to appreciate the fact that social conditions are changing and thereby raising the need for greater respect for the individual's right to make his or her own moral decisions. Masolo ends the book by comparing the two positions with those of Immanuel Kant (the individualist) and Kwasi Wiredu (the communitarian). His last word is that communitarianism anticipates conflicts among members of a social group, and facilitates dialogue to resolve them (p.266).

Overall Assessment

Masolo writes passionately, yet incisively and exhaustively. One comes away from each chapter with a clear understanding of the background information that gave rise to it, and of ways in which the author has sought to move the discussion forward. Perhaps nowhere else is this more evident than in his discussion of the Luo concept of *juok*, where I felt as if I was sitting at the feet of a Luo elder conversant with the conceptual culture of his people and the rationale behind it - the kind of person who the late Prof. Odera Oruka would have referred to as a philosophic sage (Oruka 1983, 386).

Besides, Masolo's focus on indigenous knowledge is timely due to the fact that while this issue is attracting considerable interest, it frequently suffers gross misrepresentation. A number of writers still seem to harbour the misconception that indigenous African knowledge stands in contradistinction to "modern" knowledge, so that, for instance, they would consider the storing of cold water in an earthen pot to be

a manifestation of indigenous African knowledge at work, and the storing of water in a refrigerator to be an instance of “modern” technology. A number of articles in the World Bank’s collection of essays on indigenous African knowledge begin from this highly debatable premise (see World Bank 2004). Masolo’s highly competent utilisation of Luo thought along with the tools of philosophical analysis demonstrate that various facets of knowledge are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive or loosely complementary.

What is more, Masolo’s proficiency in both English and French, and his vast exposure to the philosophical traditions associated with both languages in Africa and in the West, make him a timely “bridge” between African philosophers in the so-called Francophone and Anglophone countries. However, to fulfil this role more effectively, he needs to supply ample translations of his references to French titles (see for example Note 10 on p.56).

All in all, Masolo’s depth of analysis, his supply of ample references to support his discourse, and his elegant but generally easy-to-read language makes this book a priceless addition to the bookshelf of anyone who seeks to keep abreast with the incisive debate now raging concerning the nature of indigenous African knowledge in general, and African philosophy in particular. It is a masterly sequel to his *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (see Masolo 1994). More than four decades ago, Kwasi Wiredu stated that the task of philosophy is to examine the intellectual foundations of human life using the best available modes of knowledge and reflection for human well being (Wiredu 1980, 62). It is my considered opinion that this is what Masolo has done in *Self and Community in a Changing World*. Frantz Fanon declared that “Europe's most horrible crime was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity” (Fanon 1967, 254). Masolo’s book is a significant contribution to the reconstruction of the African psyche devastated by centuries of military, economic and ideological domination.

References

- Carnap, R. 1959. "Psychology in Physical Language". A.J. Ayer ed. *Logical Positivism*. New York: The Free Press, pp.165-198.
- Fanon, F. 1967. *The Wretched of the Earth*, with a Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Constance Farrington trans. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Heywood, Andrew. 2004. *Political Theory: An Introduction, Third Edition*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1904. *Leviathan: Or, the Matter, Forme & Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill*. Waller, A.R. Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hountondji, Paulin J. 1983. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. With an Introduction by Abiola Irele. London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd.
- . 1997. *Combats pour le sens*. Cotonou : Editions du Flamboyant. (English trans. *The Struggle for Meaning*, by John Conteh-Morgan, Athens, OH, Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2002).
- Masolo, D.A. 1994. *African Philosophy: in Search of Identity*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.
- Neurath, O, 1983. "Physicalism: The Philosophy of the Vienna Circle". Cohen, R.S. and M. Neurath eds. *Philosophical Papers 1913-1946*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, pp.48-51.
- Oruka, H. Odera. 1983. "Sagacity in African Philosophy". *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol.23.
- Smart, J.J.C. 2007. "The Mind/Brain Identity Theory". Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mind-identity>
- Stoljar, Daniel. 2009. "Physicalism". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/physicalism>
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition". In Taylor, Charles et. Al. 1994, pp.25-73.
- Taylor, Charles, K. Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer and Susan Wolf. 1994. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Gutmann, Amy ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tempels, Placide. 1959. *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. 1980. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- World Bank. 2004. *Indigenous Knowledge: Local Pathways to Global Development*. N.P.: The Africa Region's Knowledge and Learning Group.