IS ELIJAH MASINDE A SAGE-PHILOSOPHER? THE DISPUTE BETWEEN H. ODERA ORUKA AND CHAUNGO BARASA

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In 1975, H. Odera Oruka of the University of Nairobi launched a sage-philosophy project. Through interviewing rural sages, and recording what had previously been only oral tradition, he hoped to witness to the larger academic community that rural Africans have a vigorous tradition of philosophical speculation and questioning. Recording and publishing the sages' ideas made them available to a larger community as food for thought and the subject of critical evaluation.[1]

One constant problem of method faced by sage philosophy concerns the question, who is a sage? What qualities must one possess before researchers associated with the University of Nairobi project will apply that title? A further complexity comes from the distinction between 'mere' folk sages and philosophic sages, which Odera Oruka regarded as integral to the study. By Odera Oruka's stated criteria, the former is able to articulate the beliefs of his or her community, but not able to reflectively analyze or critically evaluate them; the latter engages in critical evaluation and creatively comes up with a personal philosophy which differs from the accepted views of the group. As Jay van Hook notices, the criteria for categorization, although clear in theory, are often blurred in practice.[2] Sages during interviews are unaware of these categories; decisions about whether they are sage-philosophers or not will be made by the researchers, familiar with academic philosophy, who reflect on the transcripts after the interview. But the criteria for sagacity in general and philosophic sages in particular, are themselves part of the larger debate - about what is philosophy and who is a philosopher - which has preoccupied African philosophical circles for the last fifty years or so.[3]

Sometimes a problematic or borderline case, and the debates surrounding it, can help to clarify or highlight the shades of meaning contained in a concept. This paper presents the special case of Elijah Masinde, a Bukusu prophet of this century who died in 1986, and the discussion regarding him between H. Odera Oruka and Chaungo Barasa, one of Odera Oruka's key interviewers in-the-field, responsible over the years for interviewing about one hundred sages, and himself included as a sage in Odera Oruka's book, *Sage Philosophy*. Odera Oruka, generally eager to count many rural Africans not previously considered philosophers, among his sage-philosophers so as to secure their inclusion in the history of world philosophy, makes some distinctions suggesting caution regarding Masinde's case. In the process we uncover Odera Oruka's definition of philosophy as a rational process quite different from religious inspiration or revelation. Nevertheless he is sensitive to Barasa's

arguments, which suggest pertinent parallels between the life and characteristics of Elijah Masinde and those of Socrates. I will suggest that Masinde, insofar as he exhibits any philosophical attributes, more closely mirrors the philosophical ideologue, perhaps the 'Socrates' of Plato's Republic who criticizes the present regime by constructing a radically different ideal society, rather than the empty-handed questioner and father of 'Socratic method'. Masinde excels in bringing drama and action to his ideas, but he is also an enigmatic character who neglects to communicate his intellectually in depth ideas in a straightforward way, leaving analysts guessing as to what he 'really meant'. In contrast to other enigmatic figures like Nietzsche or Wittgenstein, Masinde's remarks are all couched in the language of revelation or activism - so one can at best only infer a ponderous philosophy as a prerequisite for his public statements.

The discussion regarding Masinde

In *Sage Philosophy,* Elijah Masinde's name comes up as Odera Oruka and Chaungo Barasa discuss the questions, what is philosophy, and who are philosophers?[4] A debate is sparked when Barasa insists that there are some Africans the philosophical equivalent of Socrates, and he names Masinde as a particular example. Odera Oruka then wonders how to best classify Masinde as a fanatic, a hero, or a wise man? Odera Oruka is predisposed at first to the label 'fanatic', but is open to 'hero' as a possibility. Barasa insists that 'hero' is not the best terminology; because his heroism was not merely opportunist, but based on inherent wisdom. Barasa calls Masinde a 'gadfly' that was sent by the gods to lead his community to a life of wisdom. "He manifested a craving to enlighten society about the rationale behind various values of their society," Barasa says. The derogatory title 'fanatic' is based on a misunderstanding of Masinde's zeal for the good of his community. Certainly, one who is studying implicit values, articulating them, and then evaluating them rationally, while encouraging others in society to do so as well, would be considered to be doing philosophy. Was that Masinde's role?

Certainly Masinde has a reputation throughout the Bukusu region up to the day. Sages included in Odera Oruka's book such as Ali Mwitani Masero and Simuyu Chaungo mention their admiration of Masinde.[5] Several sages interviewed by this author in 1996 pointed to Masinde as one of their role models, someone who inspired them to sagacity.[6] But when those interviewed were pressed to explain what was particularly great about Masinde, reference was first made to Masinde's ability to accurately predict future events, such as the British leaving and Africa winning its political independence. Regarding his role as a prophet, and whether he was philosophical in his prophesying, Barasa explains, "I think he was a wise man who was inquiring into prevailing reality of that time and summing up what it would hatch into the next day." In

other words, Masinde was using experience, reason, and intuition to come up with his predictions, as philosophers do. If Barasa is right, Odera Oruka might be willing to agree that Masinde is a philosopher. Odera Oruka had defined intuition as "a form of mental skill which helps the mind to extrapolate from experience and come to establish extra-statistical inductive truths", and he cites examples of some of his sages whom he found to be particularly intuitive, engaged in bold speculation regarding their own societies.[7]

Considering Masinde only died in 1987, over ten years after Odera Oruka started his sage philosophy project, one wonders why he did not seek out Masinde for an interview. After all, Odera Oruka had done extensive interviews with Oginga Odinga by that time. Odera Oruka had interviewed Joash Walumoli, a co-founder of *Dini Ya Musambwa*, and considered Walumoli a sage.[8] Walumoli is a much more humble figure than Masinde, yet he is praised by Odera Oruka for his sagacity, while Masinde is not. In a cautionary preface regarding who should be considered a sage or not, Odera Oruka explains that "A prophet is not a sage just because he has a flair for predicting the future. A person is a sage in the philosophic sense only to the extent that he is consistently concerned with the fundamental ethical and empirical issues and questions relevant to the society" and has "ability to offer insightful solutions to some of those issues."[9] Let us see if this description fits Masinde.

Is Masinde a religious figure, a political activist, and/or a philosopher?

Barasa seems willing to concede that there were philosophical shortcomings in Masinde, as he explains that "what sort of spoiled the ruse of wisdom for Masinde was his intrusion into politics." However he insists that political involvement does not necessarily disqualify one from being a philosopher, since even Socrates and Jesus had "a penchant for political trouble-shooting..."[10] Implicit in Barasa's comments is the idea that if one is too religious or too political, one is probably not philosophical enough. Prophets who literally believe God spoke to them do not rely enough on their own keen insights to foresee the future; over-involvement in politics distracts one from a fuller pursuit of wisdom. Barasa's scruples hurt the case of Masinde being a philosopher, since according to the varied interpretations which we will soon review, Masinde was very religious, or very political, or both. However, Barasa is being too cautious; one can be philosophically wise while being a religious figure and/or a politician. Even artists and social scientists can be philosophers as long as they devote themselves to expounding on the theoretical aspects of their fields. Instead, an important question buried in Barasa's remark is, did Masinde's untiring political activism prevent him from devoting himself to wisdom? In other words, was Masinde a wise, ponderous

activist or not? Let us look at the ways in which he was a politician, and/or a religious figure.

Audrey Wipper calls *Dini ya Musambwa* a religious-political movement since it has as its objective "redefining man's relationships to questions of ultimate concern- the purpose of life, of death, his relations to the cosmos and to his fellow man".[11] Neil Smelser explains that the strains imposed on a colonial people are always multiple, including "economic deprivation, exclusion from political life, loss of status, and the importation of unfamiliar and disruptive beliefs and norms". Since colonial domination is so totalistic, responses of colonial peoples have a corresponding totalism, not easily classified as merely economic, political, philosophical, or religious.[12]

G.S. Were lists the social injustices that influenced the origin and course of movement of *Dini ya Musambwa* as, 1) low wages; 2) long work hours; 3) poor housing; 4) government's conscription policy a) for armed forces; b) for European farms; c) soil conservation; and d) uprooting of Mexican marigold; 5) carrying an identity card; 6) high prices and failure to supply invoices for good purchased from Indian traders.[13] When asked how he perceived his brother Elijah's mission or goal, Stephen Makoha Mwasame stated, "He was fighting for the freedom of Kenyans and Africans generally from colonialism."[14] This testimony emphasizes the political and activist side of Masinde.

Oginga Odinga in his book *Not Yet Uhuru* argues that Masinde was in his estimation foremost a politician.[15] Is his estimation accurate? Certainly some of Masinde's public actions such as blocking the road to conscripted workers, or reassembling on the former battlefield, and even Masinde's manner of defending himself when brought to court on various charges, follow the pattern of civil disobedience actions. For example, he would remain silent in court, refusing to talk to all but the 'Head of Colonizers' back in England.[16] In addition to theatrical disobedience actions and gatherings, Masinde also orchestrated meetings held at Broderick Falls and Kimilili to discuss the working conditions of laborers employed by Indians. Parties of five or six would go to the shops and lay down conditions regarding hours of work, housing, etc.. They threatened to withhold supplies unless their conditions were met.[17] The question is, were these various actions religious expressions, or calculated political manoeuvres?

A scenario elucidated by Masinde's brother, Stephen Makoha Mwasame, may shed light on the issue. He notes that while his brother was in detention, prisoners were forced to do agricultural labor. On one occasion, Masinde convinced his fellow prisoners that vegetation, being created by God, should not be uprooted. The result was that the prisoners stopped their laboring, to the consternation of their British prison guards. When asked whether Masinde truly thought it was wrong to uproot vegetation, Makoha Mwasame explained

that it was not a sincerely held religious tenet of Masinde's. But it was said, and the strike was organized, as a way of protesting injustice.[18] The more it can be shown that Masinde did not believe his own pronouncements, but merely said them to effect a political protest, the more we can confidently say that he was mainly a political figure.

Masinde himself insisted that he was a religious figure, like Jesus in his healing mission. However, unlike Jesus who helped the blind, the lame, and lepers, Masinde specialized in curing people from the *musambwa* disease, which only occurred among his followers.[19] Masinde claimed that God spoke to him and was the source of his prophecies. But Masinde had additional claims beyond mere consultation, as were recorded in the following interview:

"I have spoken to God on several occasions. He assures me that I will be the only person to remain at the end of the world ... If my followers are loyal to me, I can't prevent it, for they believe in Masinde, the son of God, who was not born in this world but came from heaven and dropped in a cave at Sayoni on Mt. Elgon."[20]

Such claims to divinity can be seen either as proof that Masinde regarded himself as a religious figure, or else they are a ruse to encourage unquestioning obedience in his followers - neither of which are particularly philosophical.

Robert Buijtenhuijs takes Masinde at his word and so insists that Masinde and *Dini Ya Musambwa* were primarily religious rather than political. He notes that members were convinced that prayer and ritual, rather than activism, would win Kenyan independence. He cites the case of Masinde followers believing that Maina himself, the mythical ancestor of the Bukusu, would drive away the Europeans. Their inability to construct an effective political strategy, according to Buijtenhuijs, was due to "the incapability of perceiving the real mechanisms of colonial domination".[21] One must admit that Masinde's account of colonial domination in Africa and his strategy to counteract its affects differ radically from Fanon, Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere and others. Certainly, Buijtenhuijs takes Masinde's words and actions at face value and sees them as signs that Masinde's thought was over-simple; such a reading would minimize Masinde's status as a philosopher.

Wipper as well cites a *DYM* belief that *lunsunu* wood found in North Nyanza symbolized the death of Europeans, and "they placed it in a hillock outside their huts in the belief that its presence would drive away dishonest people from their lands."[22] She also recounts that Masinde took two thousand members to the hills of Kimilili, where he said the British had planted a powerful medicine which was the Europeans' 'secret weapon'. Masinde picked a spot, people began digging, and a bottle with a slip of paper was found, at which point Masinde declared that with the medicine found, Africans' subservience to Europe was ended.[23] Such accounts make one to wonder

whether Buijtenhuijs was indeed right in seeing Masinde as too politically naive to qualify as a politician.

Masinde as prophet

The question of how to interpret Masinde's sayings and claims remains acute if we attempt to regard him as a prophet. Barasa's argument that Masinde is a philosopher hinges partly on the claim that Masinde's prophecies were the result of careful, ponderous readings of the times. This would depart from the literalistic interpretation of the prophecies being dictated to him by God in a revelation.

Followers were impressed that so many of Elijah Masinde's prophecies came true, for example, that Europeans should quit Kenya; that Africans should rule the country; that there would be fighting in Africa; that bullets would not kill him; and that there would be many religious sects in Africa and Kenya. However critics note that one of his prophecies did not come true- the one that said that he would appoint his own administrative officers after driving the white man from Kenya.[24]

Masinde's predictions must be seen as one example of the larger phenomenon of prophets and prophecy in East Africa. Anderson and Johnson, in their book on East African prophets, dismiss the overly simple view that prophets merely foresee the future.[25] Michael Adas stresses that many East African prophets led violent rebellions inspired by an urge for social revitalization. Central to the idea of revitalization is the call for moral restoration.[26]

Charles Ambler has analyzed the role of prophecy in colonial Kenya. Looking at the number of prophecies cited in Kenya regarding the "coming of strangers", Ambler notes, "it would have been surprising if nineteenth-century seers had not made predictions of the coming of strangers ... After all, the Europeans who advanced on central Kenya in the late 1800's did not fall out of the sky." Indeed some prophets had taken journeys to the coast, and seen the railroad under construction; this accounted for the many stories of the 'snake' cutting across the land.[27] According to Ambler, prophets are better understood as not merely those who see the future but as "women or men who possessed a vision of how communities should face those events and thus shape the future". According to Kennell Jackson, prophets not only point to future misfortunes, "but simultaneously point to the correct behavior and communal remedies".[28]

Ambler explains that prophets in Kenya were often asked whether the British, as they advanced, they should be resisted by force, or befriended. Elders couched their prophecies in terms that would either encourage or discourage the young warriors seeking to know whether they should undertake a battle.[29] Similarly, Masinde, who wanted the members of his community to resist the injustices of colonial oppression, may have couched his prophecy in

such terms as to encourage resistance. This is a strategy quite different from explaining to the people in political or rational terms, why they should resist colonialism; perhaps such means were taken because they were considered most appropriate in the cultural context. As Campbell S. Momoh asserts, wise elders ar admired for their ability to grip the audience with their truth.[30]

So, Barasa's interpretation of Masinde's prophecies being rooted in his own keen insight even while expressed as revelation is not too far from the analysis of other social scientists on the topic. After all, Masinde's prophecies in the 30's and 40's occur at the same time that India, another British colony, is fighting for its independence as well. Citing Britain's soon leaving as an inevitability is calculated to give people courage to engage in acts of resistance. However well-suited such expressions may be in the context of East Africa, the shortcoming of such a style of communication is that those who hear the prophecy cannot themselves follow the logical train of thought that led the prophet to his or her insight.

Masinde and Socrates as gadflies

A point of comparison between Masinde and Socrates, crucial to Barasa's argument, concerns their roles as gadflies to their societies. Both challenged injustices as they saw them in their communities. In fact both were brought before courts on charges of encouraging insubordination and advocating attacks on the social order. In the case of Masinde, records show that on several public occasions (during the colonial occupation of Kenya), Masinde suggested to his followers that missionary churches should be destroyed, that Asians and whites should go back home and leave Kenya.[31] It was because his followers would commit arson and acts of violence that Masinde was brought into court to face charges of instigation. Were Masinde and Socrates similar in their instigation, or do Masinde's acts, falling short of philosophy, belong to the realm of mere political agitation?

Leonard Harris cites John McDermott, who explains that the tradition of American philosophy "does not include righteous indignation to the point of killing or self-sacrifice".[32] Yet Masinde would risk his life, and the lives of others, engaging in physical battle. In the context of his remark, Harris considers the notion of 'American philosopher' too limiting, and he notes that it serves to marginalize African-American philosophers who are struggling against injustice to a greater extent than their white counterparts. So, perhaps Masinde's methods, which might look 'extreme' from the comfort of an academic's desk, may seem called for in a society oppressed by the yoke of British colonialism.

Commentators have noted that Masinde's role in colonial Kenya was played out in a context of grave injustice. The entire Bukusu population had no say in how they were to be ruled; their political marginalization led to economic

deprivation.[33] Here, we discover one key contrast between Socrates and Masinde: Socrates protested against the democratic rule of the common man in favor of control by a competent elite; whereas Masinde and his followers rebelled against the control by an elite that considered itself most competent to govern, and fought instead for a restoration of power to common people.[34]

One should not overlook the harmful side to Masinde's message. There is an explicit racism in it that has harmed East Africa to this day. Even today, after the disastrous example of Idi Amin's ousting of all Asians from Uganda in the 70's, a political campaigner for the Presidential seat in the upcoming Kenya election suggested that Asian shopkeepers should go home. Public opinion about the politician's remarks was divided between those who agreed with him and others who considered his remarks immoral, instigative, and a possible source of grave danger.[35] While there is still economic injustice in Kenya and the economy is still adversely affected by neo-colonial economic structures, blame for problems more rationally rests on the shoulders of individuals and policies, not races.

However much we may praise Masinde's motives of fighting against colonialism, the reservations raised in the previous section point to a very un-Socratic method. Socrates used philosophical dialogue to encourage the youth to see that they owed no blind allegiance to the "wise" elders of Athens. This method certainly posed a threat to the status quo. Socrates urged his admirers to question each other and even Socrates himself. In the *Republic*, Book Two, the two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantos, put forward a very tough criticism of the argument Socrates advances in Book One.

In contrast, one follower of Masinde said, "I believed in Masinde, fearing that he would cause me to die if I wronged him".[36] We can tell by Masinde's remarks about his own divinity, and by the fear expressed by followers that Masinde could curse people and cause them illnesses, that Masinde was not encouraging philosophical speculation and questioning. This is not necessarily just a personal fault in Masinde. As John Middleton notes, a key attribute of the prophetic movements in Kenya is the prophet's claim to absolute truth.[37] Similar attitudes can be found in West Africa. As Joseph Osei notes, in some African traditions truth was considered something fixed, for which one paid a price or gave a gift, as a sign of appreciation for receiving the truth. The 'gift' of truth was not to be questioned. Osei therefore agrees with Wiredu, who had earlier argued that authoritarianism was one of the curses of some traditional African societies, and that one positive role that philosophy could play in Africa would be to challenge such authoritarianism.[38] Such a line of argument suggests that not only Masinde, but prophets as a group are wrongly sought out as examples of philosophers in traditional Kenya society (although there may be some exceptions).

It could however be argued that Masinde, insofar as he encouraged people to reject their treatment as second-class citizens at the hands of others, was encouraging people to question- particularly, to question the political authorities of the times. But this in itself does not amount to fostering a questioning attitude, including habits of reflection and analysis.

An interesting example of Masinde's rhetoric involves his steeling followers against fears of death, and assuring them of his own immense power. Masinde was famous for claiming that bullets could not hurt him; that any fired in his direction would turn to water.[39] However such rhetoric can have dangerous consequences. In an incident at Malakisi where Masinde tried to drive away Roman Catholic missionaries, members of a Masinde-led crowd said he had told them that bullets would not harm them. But the Europeans' bullets were indeed effective; police killed eleven people, and sixteen were wounded.[40] The same rhetoric encouraged the Suk to attack a British stronghold; armed only with spears, twenty-eight died, fifty were wounded.[41]

Other than as a political strategy and rhetorical devise, can we make sense of Masinde's claims of immunity to bullets? Heroic stories about Masinde, for example regarding his ability to kick a football so high it would never come down again, tell us more about what impresses Masinde's followers than it does about the historical Masinde.[42] As a possible parallel, Socrates is well-known for his temperance and endurance. In the Symposium it was argued that wine could not make Socrates drunk; he was able to soberly philosophize all night while the other guests passed out one by one. In the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, we are presented with a Socrates who is calm in the face of death, so assured is he that the gods won't allow a bad thing to happen to a good person. Are the two characters and claims similar? Masinde, unlike Socrates, does not state that his physical death would be a good thing for him; rather, he claims immunity to physical death (by bullets). The demythologized version, which can only be read 'between the lines', would be that Masinde calculated that the British didn't want to kill him, for that would thereby make a martyr of him. Likewise, regarding the others who died, he may rationalize that the British could not kill the entire Kenyan people, so in that sense not as individuals but as a people they would live on regardless of bullets and triumph in the end. Only such interpretations can save Masinde from being inaccurate or a liar; and in both cases it is probably not the version that was believed by his followers.

Although one might justify such strategies like telling people that bullets will not harm them on political grounds, regarding lost lives as necessary casualties, this approach is obviously rhetorical and involves telling literal untruths, or at least misleading statements ,to sway the actions of a crowd. It is precisely such a use of rhetoric that was denounced by Socrates in the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*.[43]

After independence, Masinde became a vigorous moral crusader. He protested against women working in bars or wearing miniskirts; he contributed to a ban on local brews. Masinde's brother describes him as being 'initially persuasive' in such encounters, but resorting to other methods if he was not taken seriously. Indeed, Stephen Makoha recounted, "he castigated and even would beat a woman he found wearing a mini-skirt".[44] The *Daily News* was more explicit. They reported that Masinde had been imprisoned for beating a woman that he suspected of adultery. He was said to have shouted, "I do not want harlots in this town." Of course Masinde disputed the newspaper report. He suggested instead that he had merely accompanied his brother who was looking for his wife in one of the bars. However, this account jars with eye-witness reports of Masinde caning followers whom he suspected were friendly with the police.[45]

Does beating people disqualify one as a philosopher? Philosophers don't take the equivalent of a 'Hippocratic Oath' where they agree to abide by certain moral standards. In the Zen Buddhist context, Masters beat their disciples. Yet Masinde did not always preach violence. In a sermon witnessed by Wipper in 1965, Masinde told his followers that God wants them to love everyone; that weapons should not be used to fight and kill; that they should not hate each other; that they should love the people of Africa, France India, Japan, America and the whole world since 'we are all brothers and sisters'; and finally that "If you beat or abuse someone, you have beaten and abused God because God made people in his own image."[46] Such a quote might make one wonder if Masinde's beating episodes were departures from his own moral standards. However, when the stories of Masinde's beating of women in town was cited, it appeared to this researcher that the story was told, and accepted by other hearers present, not with shame about the moral lapses of a great man, but with pride at Masinde's bold, direct attack on a form of moral decadence rooted in cultural imperialism.[47]

This brings us to explore the notion of 'gadfly' a bit more closely. Socrates speaks of himself as "stuck on the state" and biting it as an old horse is bitten. As Socrates explains, "God has attached me to the city to perform the office of such a fly ... rousing, persuading, reproving every one of you."[48] Socrates admits his actions are painful but asserts that they are for the greater good of the State. But why is it good? He argues that questioning is exercise, which keeps the body politic limber. But he carefully explains that his position is not one of opposition to the government, but of helping. Although I.F. Stone argues that here Socrates is denying the full extent of his involvement in the political opposition, it is important to note that, although the metaphor of 'gadfly' could be used to describe the 'Opposition' stuck to the State to keep it on its toes (as in the British Parliamentary system), Socrates takes pains to explain that this is not how he understands his own role. He rather wants to say

that a general atmosphere of questioning and openness is healthy for society, and that his activities as a philosopher help to create that open atmosphere.

It could be said therefore, that while Socrates' role as a gadfly was to create an atmosphere and practice of openness which allowed criticism and improvement of society, Masinde's role as gadfly was primarily one of opposition member. This is not to deny that there is a philosophy inherent in an Opposition's agenda. This is to say that the procedure, the mode of action, is political rather than philosophical. To revisit the example of Masinde's beating women who departed from Bukusu traditions in behavior to embrace foreign paradigms, although one could imagine that such actions might encourage others to think critically about accepting foreign ideas, its more direct outcome is intimidation and informal social control. A more philosophical approach would have been to encourage discussion on the issue.

Conclusion

This study's accuracy is hampered by the fact that both Socrates and Masinde were orators; their ideas were recorded second-hand. Here history may have been too kind to Socrates who became 'dealized', and too unkind to Masinde, who became sensationalized. However, as knowledge of them has come down to us today, there are more contrasts than commonalties between the two.

Perhaps Chaungo Barasa wrongly chose Socrates as Masinde's closest Western philosophy parallel. It could be argued that Masinde is more like Diogenes the Cynic than Socrates. Diogenes is still considered a philosopher. His challenges to ancient Greece did indeed encourage people to think, question and evaluate their society. His lantern-lit search for one honest person in his community influenced people to evaluate themselves and aspire to the virtue that Diogenes noted was missing. For example, in 1964, after independence, Masinde spoke out against people who were buying land, because he asserted that it already belonged to them in the first place. Such vociferous opposition to a land policy sparked others to think about how the goals of the independence struggle were being subverted. It brought up issues of property rights and how to apply them justly in this new, independent state. Although not necessarily encouraging questioning itself, since Masinde believed he alone had the truth about property rights, and that other viewpoints were simply wrong, he at least prevented a governmental monopoly of public opinion on the land policy issue.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to see Masinde as putting forward an ideology which had an implicit philosophical underpinning. Just as Senghor advocated negritude, Nkrumah advocated Consciencism, and Nyerere advocated Ujaama, so Masinde advocated a return to the 'religion of your ancestors' (the literal translation of *Dini ya Musambwa*). But in some ways Masinde does not belong with these African political philosophers either; he

does not share their methods of analysis. Wipper points out that *Dini ya Musambwa* was a movement of peasants led by peasants. There was no intelligentsia, whereas the aforementioned philosophical ideologies were put forward by men with university degrees. Those devoted to Masinde as a philosopher will have the task of how to show that Masinde's expressions were not mostly rhetoric designed to move the masses, but instead the product of philosophical pondering and analysis. Wipper complained that "In one breath, Masinde rejected 'all things European' and, in the next, he promised his followers all the Europeans' riches after they had been expelled from Kenya." Masinde accepted the gift of a landrover, and yet told his followers they should reject Western education, medicine, clothes, cooking utensils, salt and sugar.[49]

It may be that the point of an exercise like this one, is not to find a philosopher in the Western Canon of whom it could be said, he or she shares a particular attribute with Masinde, thus making Masinde a philosopher. Western philosophers have many unappealing attributes as well. Although one could find some Western philosophers convinced they are completely right and others are wrong, that does not mean that attempts to control people's thoughts and manipulate their actions is a philosophical virtue. Masinde's strength is his ability to get Africans to question their subservience and inferiority in a colonial situation. Questioning the "given-ness" of one's social world is always a philosophic virtue, and in this way Masinde as a philosopher holds promise. But insofar as he had also many attributes considered philosophic vices, his usefulness as a philosophical role model diminishes, and actually may become antithetical to the encouragement of critical thinking.

Odera Oruka himself has often argued that the philosophers have a special duty to warn their communities of the implications of their actions.[50] In that way, it could be argued that the philosopher is a kind of prophet. But they are prophets who refer to reason and experience, not revelation. Odera Oruka states that in his estimation, Africa needs more critical and dialectical reason, which puts forward tentative conclusions, and less ethno-religion that promulgates absolute truths.[51] Nevertheless he is not dismissive of religious traditions, and counsels researchers that they should not summarily reject informants who suggest, for example, that they have communicated with the deceased.[52] Interestingly enough, in a footnote Odera Oruka wrote about Masinde, he implies that he believes that Masinde had the power of prophecy, by his quoting the anecdotal story regarding Masinde's burial. Masinde's relatives, ignoring his request for a certain burial site, attempted to bury him elsewhere, only to be thwarted when they discovered another body there - a magnificent scandal in its cultural context.[53] So we can surmise that Odera Oruka would not necessarily deny Masinde's claim to have talked to God; the point is, rather, that it would be better to encourage individuals to rationally

scrutinise the signs of the times and come up with policies to improve society based on humanistic, concerted action.

Odera Oruka analyzes the various words in his own community, from the Luo language, that connote wise persons. Of them all, he chooses not 'prophet', or 'hero', but '*japero*' or counsellor, as the one closest to the world-wide conception of 'philosopher'. Such counsellors are gadflies of their communities, yes; but they are involved in the constant questioning of people, getting both individuals and communities to reflect on the consequences of their actions.[54] Using sometimes pragmatic and utilitarian arguments, they persuade others to take certain courses of action, not because of faith that the person is an incarnation of God, etc., but because they are indeed the best forms of action based on rational criteria. Such procedures encourage self-understanding, and protect oneself against the manipulation of rhetoric.[55]

For these reasons, this paper agrees with Odera Oruka's hesitation to accept Masinde as a prime example of a philosophic sage. Instead, the place to look for philosophers in Kenya in the future is among the questioners. Even Barasa himself has argued that "the genuine basis for a claim to wisdom should comprise a demonstrably fecund intuition, broad experience and incisive rationalization."[56] Although Masinde may have personally had such qualities, he did not necessarily encourage them in others. In this way his role falls short of a philosopher like Socrates. This does not prevent Masinde from being admired as a hero, prophet, and great social leader.

The debate regarding Masinde's status as philosopher, while concluding sceptically, should prove to be a helpful focal point for determining which thinkers are to be studied and considered the philosophers of Africa.

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Notes

1 See H. Odera Oruka: *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1991, and Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990; also, *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy*. Nairobi: Shirikon Publishers, 1990. See as well "Fundamental Principles in the Question of 'African Philosophy'" in *Second Order* IV, No. 2 (1975), and "Sagacity in African Philosophy" in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23, 4 (December 1983).

2 Jay Van Hook: "Kenyan Sage Philosophy: A Review and Critique", in: *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. XXVII, No. 1, Fall 1995, p. 58.

3 See for example Tsenay Serequeberhan: *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*. and

D.A. Masolo: *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994.

4 Odera Oruka: *Sage Philosophy*, pp. 149-151.

5 Ibid., pp. 97, 115.

6 Masinde was cited as a role model in the following interviews of sages, which exist on tape, in possession of the author: Ali Mwitani Masero, 6 October 1995; Wanyonyi Manguliechi, 7 October 1995; Stephen Makoha Mwasame, 9 October 1995. Translated from Bukusu to English on site by Chaungo Barasa, later transcribed by Shadrack Wanjala Nasong'o. Masero was included in Odera Oruka's original collection of sage philosophers. See Odera Oruka: *Sage Philosophy*, p. 92.

7 "Cultural Fundamentals in Philosophy: Obstacles in Philosophical Dialogue", in J. Kucaradi and R.S. Cohen (eds.): *The Concept of Knowledge*. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995, pp. 167-181.

8 Odera Oruka: *Sage Philosophy*, p. 39.

9 Odera Oruka: *Sage Philosophy*, p. 3.

10 Above quotes are from Odera Oruka: *Sage Philosophy*, pp. 149-151.

11 Wipper, A.: *Rural Rebels: A Study of Two Protest Movments in Kenya*. London/New York: Oxford University Press. Introduction by Neil J. Smelser, 1977, p. 3.

12 Neil Smelser in preface to Wipper, A.: *Rural Rebels*, op. cit., p. xi.

13 G.S. Were: "Dini Ya Musambwa: A Re-assessment.", in: *Makerere Institute of Social Research Conference Papers*, No. 44, vol. 4, 1967, p. 6.

14 Stephen Makoha Mwasame, "Interview".

15 Oginga Odinga: *Not Yet Uhuru*, p.70, cited in Shimanyula: *Elijah Masinde*, p. 50.

16 Stephen Makoha Mwasame, "Interview".

17 Were, op. cit., p. 4.

18 Interview with Stephen Makoha Mwasame, 9 October 1995, as above.

19 James Bandi Shimanyula: *Elijah Masinde and the Dini Ya Musambwa*. Transafrica, 1978, pp. 45-46, 53-54.

20 Masinde in: Shimanyula: *Elijah Masinde*, pp. 45-46. Wipper notes that Masinde's claims to have special powers as a mandate from God were consistent with claims of dream prophets, diviner and rain magicians of his time. See Wipper: *Rural Rebels*, op. cit., p. 148.

21 Robert Buijtenhuijs: "Dini Ya Msambwa: Rural rebellion or counter-society?" Chapter 11 in: *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion*. edited by Wim van Binsbergen and Matthew Schoffeleers. London: KPI Ltd. (Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1985, pp. 322-345. See especially pp. 329, 341-342.

22 Wipper, A.: op. cit., p. 326.

23 Wipper, A.: op. cit., p. 157.

24 Shimanyula: *Elijah Masinde*. pp. 50-51.

25 David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson: *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995, p. 9.

26 Michael Adas, quoted in Anderson and Johnston: *Rural Rebels*, p. 13.

27 Charles Ambler: "'What is the World Going to Come To?': Prophecy and Colonialism in Central Kenya", in: Anderson and Johnson: *Revealing Prophets*. pp. 225-228.

28 Ambler and Kennell Jackson in: Ambler: "Prophecy and Colonialism". p. 232.

29 Ambler: "Prophecy and Colonialism", p. 230.

30 Campbell S. Momoh: "African Philosophy: Does it Exist?" in :*Diogenes* No. 130, 1985, p. 84.

31 Were: "Dini Ya Musambwa", pp. 3-4. See also Shimanyula, op. cit., pp. 4,6,8,17,20.

32 Leonard Harris: "The Horror of Tradition or How To Burn Babylon and Build Benin While Reading. A Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note", in: *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. XXIV, Nos. 1-3, 1992-1993, pp. 113, 110.

33 Were: "Din Ya Musambwa", pp. 5-6; Smelser in: Wipper, A.: op. cit., p. xi.

34 For an account of Socrates' political views, see I.F. Stone: *The Trial of Socrates*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1988, pp. 9-12.

35 The politician's name is Kenneth Matiba.

36 Shimanyula: *Elijah Masinde*, pp. 46-47.

37 John Middleton, quoted in: Ambler: "Prophecy and Colonialism", p. 224.

38 Joseph Osei: "Akan Oral Literature and the Development of Science: A Philosophical Diagnosis with a Prescription". Paper presented at the Second International Conference on Oral Literature in Africa, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana, 24-30 October, 1995. Also see Kwasi Wiredu: *Philosophy and An African Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

39 Shimanyula: *Elijah Masinde*. pp. 46-47, 50-51.

40 Were: "Dini Ya Musambwa", p. 4.

41 Shimanyula: *Elijah Masinde*. pp. 12-14.

42 Wipper, A.: op. cit., pp. 162, 164.

43 Although it can be pointed out that Plato himself, in the *Republic*, condones lying for purposes of manipulating people. However the parallel between Plato and Masinde founders because Masinde never justified lying nor admitted that his claims were lies.

44 Interview with Stephen Makoha Mwasame.

45 *Daily News*, November 12, 1968, quoted in: Shimanyula, op. cit., p. 32. Also see pp. 26, 46-47.

46 Wipper, A.: op. cit., p. 329.

47 Of course, in Aristophanes' parody of Socrates in *The Clouds*, Socrates encourages youths to beat their parents; but this is a farcical exaggeration of Socrates' actual advice to youths to question authority.

48 Plato: *Last Days of Socrates*. New York: Penguin, 1986. Translated by Hugh Tredennick. From the *Apology*, 30A-31C, pp. 62-63.

49 Wipper, A.: op. cit., pp. 132, 137.

50 H. Odera Oruka: *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, forthcoming, chapter 21, "Africa and the World in Philosophy," an interview with Kai Kresse, 27 October 1993.

51 Odera Oruka: *Practical Philosophy*, chapter 13, "Philosophy and Humanism Today".

52 Odera Oruka: *Practical Philosophy*, chapter 28, "A Project on Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Western Kenya".

53 Ibid., p. 108.

54 In H. Odera Oruka: *Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs*. Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1992.

55 See this author, forthcoming, "On a Mission to Morally Improve One's Society: Odera Oruka's African Sages and the Socratic Paradigm". in: *International Philosophical Quarterly*.

56 Chaungo Barasa: "The Elder's Complex: The Myth of Age and Learning as Wisdom". Unpublished paper.