

NOTES ON THE PUBLICATION OF THE FIRST
DICTIONARY OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY
- FOREWORD -

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Abstract.

This paper reproduces, in full, the *Foreword* by General Editor, Maduabuchi Dukor, to mark the publication of the *Dictionary of African Philosophy (DAF)*, the first specialised dictionary dedicated to this field. It reflects on the significance of this milestone—an authentic and pioneering work authored by African scholars, with contributions from over 85 academics from Nigeria and across the continent.

The *Foreword* situates *DAF* within the broader discourse on African thought, emphasising its role in preserving, systematising, and advancing the continent’s intellectual traditions. It discusses the dictionary’s objectives, key themes, and contributions, including: the existence of African philosophy and the Great Debate (1970s and 1980s); the substance, definition, and authenticity of African philosophy; periodisation of African philosophy; the distinction between African philosophy, ethnophilosophy, and African studies; philosophy as a tool for liberating Black communities; the role of UNESCO in promoting philosophy; how this dictionary aligns with UNESCO’s calls for multiculturalism, respect for diverse cultures, and epistemologies in the contemporary spirit; the birth of this dictionary following UNESCO’s World Philosophy Day 2021; logic and proverbs, signs and symbolism; the relationship between logic and African philosophy; African freedom as inherently tied to the freedom of philosophy; selection criteria for the entries; and acknowledgements.

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Compiling and editing a *Dictionary of African Philosophy* has been long awaited, particularly given the validation of its existence by the premises and conclusions of the Great Debate (1970s and 1980s) among thinkers both within and beyond the African continent. Indeed, these discussions served as a collective voice that has resonated on the global stage to reclaim and sustain the continent's identity, individuality, freedom, and cultural heritage. The challenges of identity and dignity posed an existential threat to African nationalist statesmen and politicians. Drawing from their informed perspectives, they recognised the urgent need to employ philosophy as a tool for liberating Black communities from the grip of imperial dominance.

African philosophy has historically developed in tandem with Western and other culturally rooted intellectual traditions. However, it is vital to understand that, for both logical and conceptual reasons, this notion does not align with race or colour-specific paradigms, often categorised as ethnic philosophies. Nor does it stand in opposition to philosophy as a universal, neutral, and inclusive discipline. Instead, African philosophy, alongside Western, Indian, or Greek ones, as well as fields like Metaphysics, Ethics, Logic, and Epistemology, are all branches of philosophy—a domain that remains fundamentally pure, neutral, and critically oriented.

Essential to all cultural systems is this neutral and critical attitude, which elevates philosophy as the monarch of knowledge and a first-order discipline, foundational to all humanistic, social and scientific fields. The term *ethnophilosophy* (Hountondji 1983), often associated with African thought, reflects a multicultural epistemic perspective. It differs, however, from African philosophy in that it emphasises collective worldviews and cultural traditions rather than a systematic approach. The prefix “ethno” qualifies specific philosophies tied to the cultures, races, and peoples they represent.

The concept of a *Dictionary of African Philosophy* is not at odds with the existing tradition of Western or Indian dictionaries. Instead, they should exist side by side, as part of a broader intellectual heritage. Incorporating an African perspective is both necessary and

complementary. Each of such works respects the uniqueness of others, contributing to a multicultural world of thought. This *Dictionary* thus serves as a comprehensive collection of notions, terms, definitions, and concepts from Metaphysics, Ethics, Logic, and Epistemology, as rooted in African intellectual traditions. Manifestations and practices may be culturally distinct, yet the underlying reality is the same across all systems of thought.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has reemphasised the role of philosophy in ancient Greek, African, and Egyptian civilisations as a response to: 1. an imbalanced global cultural order; 2. the colonialism of the 18th and 19th centuries; 3. post-colonial political and economic inequalities perpetuated by imperialism; 4. the postmodern embrace of multiculturalism; and 5. the eclipse of philosophical studies under the prevalence of sciences (Dukor 2014, 16). In its efforts to restore harmony in a world marked by disorder and man's inhumanity to man, the United Nations (UN), founded on the principles of plurality and unity of humanity, through UNESCO, renews the ancient maxim "*man know thyself*" as the cornerstone of shared human values. This timeless principle is acknowledged across cultures, adapted to the postmodern ethos, and paired with the indispensable roles of critical thinking, innovation, and the transformative interplay between cultures, science, and technology. By celebrating philosophy, UNESCO champions epistemologies, values, and ontological frameworks, ensuring that scientific and technological advancements are no longer the exclusive heritage of a single race or culture.

The publication of this collective work aligns with these objectives, addressing the historical injustices of globalisation that have marginalised the African continent and its peoples. It aims to bridge the hitherto yawning gaps created by centuries of evolutionary divergence, imperial conquests, racism, colonialism, xenophobia, apartheid and anti-Semitism. In doing so, it responds to the United Nations (UN) call for multiculturalism, respect for diverse cultures and epistemologies in the postmodern spirit,

amplifying Africa's voice in the global cultural and scientific discourse. Ultimately, this *Dictionary* seeks to balance globalisation, ensuring an equitable flow of progress from the periphery to centres, from locales to cosmopolitan realms, and from individuals to their communities.

The generational, groundbreaking idea of this *Dictionary of African Philosophy*, the first of its kind in the history of philosophy, is a prospect and outcome of the *UNESCO World Philosophy Day 2021*. I had the honour and joy of convening this event as the Head of the Department of Philosophy at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria. The series of conferences was supported by a UNESCO grant, with a keynote speech delivered by the UNESCO Director-General for Nigeria, read by Dr Nneka Okafor, and a lead paper presented by Dr Björn Freter from the School of African and Oriental Studies, London, UK. Additional papers were presented, followed by further submissions, compilations, and editing. The selection criteria were not based on whether someone is a teacher of philosophy, their university affiliation, or gender considerations. Instead, inclusion was determined based on the work of individual philosophers and their contributions to African philosophy, their engagement with concepts, notions, and knowledge, and their role as truth-bearers and excavators of theory. Many classical and foundational concepts and theories were formulated during the period of the Great Debate regarding the substance, definition, and authenticity of African philosophy, with many more ideas continuing to emerge, though they are still weighed for their epistemic significance.

An examination of the list reveals that most entries come from thinkers directly involved in the Great Debate, who contributed significantly to the development of philosophy on this continent. They are regarded as pioneers who deserve recognition. A good scholar in African philosophy must be familiar with their works. While many others are thinkers in their own right, distinctions exist between philosophers, non-philosophers, practising philosophers, and non-practising philosophers. A valid sub-contrary inference could be made: some philosophers are teachers, and some teachers

are philosophers; some philosophers are writers, and some writers are philosophers. The global digital engine, Google, has identified and listed some as philosophers, much like it recognises accredited writers and scientists. However, not all of them could be included in this edition, due to spatio-temporal constraints.

Respecting the periodisation of African philosophy and recognising the groundbreaking works of pioneers such as J.S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*, or G.E. Parrinder's *African Traditional Religions* means these texts are regarded as the African equivalents of ancient and classical Greek works. Excerpts from Mbiti and Parrinder are extensively featured due to their profound impact and their engagement with issues of personality and identity during colonial and post-colonial periods. Their concepts and notions embody the fluidity, originality, and historicity of a philosophy of being and existence that serves as a foundation for the works of contemporary scholars, particularly on metaphysics and poetry. Excerpts from classical African philosophers not only highlight their monumental influence but also affirm their authoritative status—akin to seasoned navigators charting the course of a vast expedition—with the contributors to the Great Debate serving as its key wayfinders. Similarly, excerpts from the published works of contemporary philosophers and scholars were incorporated to supplement and address relative gaps identified during the conferencing, compilation, and editing phases.

In the early 1970s, Professor Henri Maurier initiated a debate within Anglophone and Francophone universities on whether African philosophy truly existed, an inquiry approached with notable scepticism (Okolo 1993). Richard A. Wright, in his anthology, echoed this doubt, arguing that philosophy is universal and that African philosophy is no more distinct than the notion of African mathematics (Wright 1977). Those who engaged with existential questions during the Debate defended not only the intellectual legitimacy of African philosophy but also the broader rights of African people. Thinkers such as George C.M. James, Sophie Oluwole, Chukwudum B. Okolo, T.U. Nwala, Olusegun

Sodipo, Barry Hallen, Lancinay Keita, Godwin Sogolo, C.S. Momoh, K.C. Anyanwu, or Emmanuel Eze championed the preservation of Africa's unique cultural identity. Positioned as inclusivists, liberalists, and advocates for cultural authenticity, they laid the foundation for contemporary African thinking with meticulous logic and argumentation, countering claims of its nonexistence.

This group directly opposed exclusivists and monists, such as Paulin Hountondji, Henry Odera Oruka, Kwasi Wiredu, or Peter Bodunrin—often labelled as “philosophers in Africa” rather than African philosophers—who argued that African philosophy failed to meet the universal standards rooted in Greek and Western traditions (Dukor 2005, 18; Dukor 2021, 20).

The Great Debate produced a wealth of concepts and theories, including J.S Mbiti's *African Philosophy and Religion*; G.E. Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion*; Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*; Alexis Kagame's *Ethnohistory and Ethnophilosophy (Studies on Indigenous Philosophical Systems)*; Peter Bodunrin's *Question of African Philosophy*; Kwasi Wiredu's *Conceptual Decolonisation of African Philosophy*; H.O. Oruka's *Philosophical Sagacity*; L. Keita and C.S. Momoh's *Periodisation of African Philosophy*; T.U. Nwala's *Treatise on William Amo of Ghana and Igbo Philosophy*; C.B. Okolo's *African Philosophy as Truth*; Innocent C. Onyewuenyi's *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy: An Exercise in Afrocentrism*; Anyanwu's *African Philosophy as African People's Sense of Their Existence, of Their Destiny, and of the World in Which They Live*; Sophie Oluwole's *Africanness of African Philosophy*; J. Omoregbe's *Postulations of African Socrates, Plato, Descartes and Hegel*; Hountonji's *Myth or Reality of African Philosophy*, and Gyekye's *Tradition and Modernity in Akan Conceptual Scheme*, among other. All of these opened the door to African philosophy as an intellectual endeavour, affirming its place alongside other global traditions. Members of both schools became prominent figures, whose contributions illuminated the field despite challenges from Darwinian evolutionists, imperialists, modernists, and detractors often referred to as “black intellectuals in white skins”. Their efforts have ensured

that African philosophy continues to evolve rather than be overshadowed or dismissed. By the end of the Great Debate, both exclusivists and inclusivists had played key roles in shaping the foundation of contemporary thought. The dialectical nature of philosophy remains a guiding principle for both sides in the methodological dispute. Ultimately, it appears that these key figures I describe as cardinals agreed that African philosophy, as philosophy, is a first-order, critical, and logical inquiry into essential concepts, terms, and notions about African culture, personality, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology, framed within the theoretical lens of humanism. This perspective distinguishes African philosophy from social, historical, and cultural narratives or commentaries, often misclassified as such.

I think a key lesson to take is not conflating African philosophy with African Studies. Materials from African Studies—such as divination, proverbs, oral traditions, deities, witchcraft, and rituals associated with life events—serve as rich sources for philosophical reflection but must not be mistaken as first-order philosophical activities. African philosophy is a sub-discipline of philosophy itself. It is philosophical in its essence, neutrally authoritative in argumentation, objectively grounded, and scientifically rigorous.

The lack of criticism and, eventually, simplicity, are indicators that society has lost its values. Sagacious elders have become scarce, and leaders lack sincerity. Consequently, renegades sacrifice philosophical traditions, disciplinary rigour, neutrality, and non-partisanship for fleeting personal ambitions, abandoning logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethical wisdom.

On a positive note, there is a real need for philosophical reflections that emphasise sagacity, diversity, and unity, without compromising its fundamental role in relation to knowledge and society. African philosophers must avoid falling victim to the proverbial *God's death* for disobedience or the Sisyphean resignation that Albert Camus describes. African philosophy is, and must remain, a branch of philosophy, although its members have often failed to unanimously and critically pursue the common good for

the benefit of society. Between 2019 and 2020, for instance, in Nigeria—the most populous black nation in Africa—the judiciary undermined philosophy and reason. It desecrated transcendence, subjectivity, and purity of the universal monarchy of reason and the philosopher-king when it unscrupulously became the arbiter of disputes among Nigerian philosophers. These disputes were played out through rival associations such as the Nigerian Philosophers Association (NPA), the Philosophers Association of Nigeria (PAN), and the Association of Professional Philosophers of Nigeria (APPON), among others. A tragic spectacle, a dance in the forest with philosophical morbidity, originating from splinters and categories devoid of logical validity or reason. Such behaviour is a symptom of emotivism—a dangerous overambition to extend the boundaries of African philosophy into illogical realms. Such emotional drive is an underlying ailment plaguing these incongruous philosophical associations, risking a descent into fragmented tribal philosophies. Fortunately, there are still sagacious elders and leaders who are not only extant legacies but are also intellectual authorities and guardians in their own right. These figures, who are part of this dictionary, must be consulted with the utmost respect for the sacrosanct principles of reason. To ignore them in citations, excerpts, or engagement is to exhibit disrespect for African philosophy, the humanities, literature, and the liberal culture that underpins African ethics in the public sphere (Dukor 2023). Philosophy, at its core, is a critical discourse—both in theory and practice.

Proverbs, as one of the major sources of African philosophy, require first-order elucidation that goes beyond the scope of African Studies. In Africa, proverbs carry both epistemological and deontological values, often extolling moral virtues while condemning vices. This duality makes them prime subjects of philosophical inquiry and analysis. For example, some of them foreshadow empiricism, as when elders say “Experience is the content of wisdom“. The Yoruba aphorisms “The navel is middle of the body” and “Nobody tests wine with the mouth of another

person” assert that knowledge is derived from personal experience. Furthermore, the universal nature of knowledge is captured in the adage “Wisdom is not the exclusive possession of anyone and does not belong to one individual”. Beyond their epistemological dimension, proverbs also possess metaphysical significance. For instance, statements like “What you find in life is what you choose in heaven” and “Earth is a market, heaven is home” (Dukor 2021, 117).

Similarly, symbols and symbolism hold intrinsic and extrinsic metaphysical and epistemological values. They can be analysed as propositions within the modal logic of necessity, tautologies, and contingencies. Proverbs, symbols and symbolism in divination practices or conversations are candidates of logic and subjects of logical scrutiny. However, they are not ends in themselves; they must undergo the test of logical determinacy or indeterminacy. Thinking endeavour demands that the natural language of proverbs, symbols, and symbolism be translated into a logically precise language—one that distinguishes truth from falsity and embraces the structures of categorical propositions, *modus ponens*, *modus tollens*, conditionals, contradictions, contraries, sub-contraries, contingencies, tautologies, syllogisms, modalities, and counterfactuals. Without such rigorous transformation, there cannot be a scientific language or a firm epistemic foundation for an African Renaissance (Dukor 2014).

The absence or neglect of philosophy, particularly African philosophy, could have tragic implications, as it might seemingly validate the prejudiced assertions of figures like Gobineau, Charles Darwin, Voltaire, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Abraham Lincoln, Edgar Allan Poe, Andrew Johnson, Benjamin Franklin, Arnold Toynbee, or Albert Schweitzer, who claimed that Africans cannot think or philosophise. However, I believe that Africans can harness the power of African philosophy to assert their freedom from neo-colonialism and imperialism, as well as to demonstrate their potential in technological, economic, and political spheres. Philosophy provides the essential theoretical framework

for such advancements, making African freedom inherently tied to the freedom of philosophy (Dukor 2021, *Introduction*).

Every field—be it technology, science, politics, or social action—rests on theoretical frameworks or guiding principles. Quantum mechanics, quantum gravity and the general theory of relativity are all Western theoretical frameworks. Similarly, African scientific initiatives should be founded on African epistemology, ensuring coherence with scientific evidence and predictability while embodying a uniquely African scientific stance. This theoretical framework is embedded within African cultures, symbols, and practices, such as the making of rain, therapeutic medicines, visual arts, sculptures, or metallurgy (Dukor 2021, 1-243).

African philosophy may even embody the heritage that was once appropriated from Egypt to the West. Without Egyptian philosophy, there might not have been Western philosophy, and without Sub-Saharan (Black) African philosophy, there might not have been Egyptian philosophy (George G.M. James 1980; Onyewuanyi Innocent 1994). Philosophy is an intrinsic part of our heritage, and it must be practised with a sense of logic—not as though borrowed from the West, nor with an undue need to differentiate it from Western thought. Logic, as both art and science, is crucial for distinguishing correct from incorrect arguments and for increasing the proficiency of reasoning (Dukor 2018, 15). Only with a rigorous sense of logic can we effectively analyse, conceptualise, and stimulate African theoretical frameworks, ultimately leading to the development of an African-origin science and technology. African philosophy, when practised with intellectual rigour, becomes the foundation for reclaiming and advancing our cultural and scientific heritage.

As a prelude to a scientific approach to Africa, experimenting with the translation of proverbs and wise sayings into inductive and categorical statements is essential. This method aims to make them amenable to logical and scientific investigation. Many African proverbs and wise sayings are rhetorical in nature and often appear to lack explicit epistemic content. However, a closer examination

reveals that they encapsulate profound insights into African worldviews and moral philosophies, often with epistemological depth. Below are some examples of proverbs and wise sayings—particularly among the Igbo and Yoruba—that I attempted to convert into categorical propositions (*See Dukor 2021d, 94-106*):

1. *Proverb*

The child being carried on the back does not know that the trek is difficult.

Categorical Proposition

All children being carried on the back lack knowledge of the difficulty of the trek.

2. *Proverb*

The snail is an animal who carries his house with him wherever he goes.

Categorical Proposition

All snails carry their houses with them wherever they go.

A logical investigation of another sample of proverbs and wise sayings indicates that some lend themselves well to analysis through *Modus Ponens* and *Modus Tollens*.

1. If life were like a seedling, the enemy would uproot it.

$(P \rightarrow Q)$

Life is like a seedling (P)

The enemy will uproot it (Q)

$P \rightarrow Q$

P

$\therefore Q$ Modus Ponens

2. Laughter does not necessarily signify pleasure.

$(P \rightarrow \neg Q)$

Laughter (P)

May not be a pleasure ($\neg Q$)

$P \rightarrow \neg Q$

P

$\therefore \neg Q$ Modus Ponens

My approach has been to formalise simple statements into categorical propositions and conditionals (or implications). These arguments are deductive and inferential in nature, warranting logical investigation. However, some are inductive and could also be suitable for scientific inquiry. Many arguments of these forms are tautological or self-evident, as their conclusions are implicitly contained in their premises. As such, their epistemological content may be questionable, though the arguments themselves are not necessarily invalid.

Cassian R. Agera distinguished between *psychogenic syllogism* (inference for oneself) and *logogenic syllogism* (inference for another). Here's an example of *psychogenic logic* he cited:

Whatever is smoky is fiery.
The yonder hill is smoking.
Therefore, the yonder hill is fiery.

This conforms to Aristotelian or traditional logic.

M—P

S—M

∴ S—P

The *logogenic syllogism* is made for another. He cited this example:

The yonder hill is fiery.
It is smoky.
Whatever is smoky if fiery.

Additionally, there is the Ifa (Yoruba) mystical or divination chart, the symbols of which I have attempted to convert into logical symbols for logical investigations and scientific analysis. (See Dukor 2021d, 180-184 and Dukor 1995, 135-140.)

Ifa features a mystical chart containing 256 symbols, known as Odu. Of these, 16 are considered major Odu, and the remaining 240 are combinations (minors). All of them function as laws. An average native scientist, priest, or Babalawo (diviner) is expected to memorise at least 1360 verses.

In the process of casting the Ifa, certain elements are routinely employed by the oracle. The primary tools are *Opele* and *Ikin*. *Opele* is an instrument used in divination, consisting of four pairs of special ‘seeds’ tied together with a string. When a seed faces upward, it is represented by a single dot (.), and when it faces downward, it is represented by two dots (. .). If all the seeds are facing upward, the Odu revealed is *Eji-Ogbe*. If all the seeds are facing downward, the Odu revealed is *Oyeku-Meji*.

Further logical investigations could lead to a more simplified, rigorous and applied use of propositional, predicate, and modal logic, which can be then employed to verify and epistemologically validate the African mystical chart or divination system. This system is both science and art, requiring logical rationalisation and a transition from closed, sacred and mystical knowledge to an open, investigative, non-falsifiable and confirmable body of science and knowledge. As art, divination can only exist as epistemology and methodology, with little chance of evolving into a fully developed advanced science. The task of transforming this system lies within African philosophy and philosophers, with the aid of both inherent and extant logical tools.

Furthermore, this attempt shows how the findings of African Studies can be subject to logical analysis. What some refer to as African Logic is, in reality, either the correct or incorrect application of logical principles or a critical examination of existing ideas within African philosophy. Yet, there is nothing uniquely African about applying logical principles or engaging in critical thinking in African Studies. If we examine what is sometimes called three-valued logic in Igbo or Yoruba, we see that it is either undermined or substantiated and ultimately determined by logical principles of conjunction, disjunction, *modus ponens*, and so on.

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The *UNESCO World Day of Logic 2024 Conference*, titled “Phenomenology of African Logic”, places the philosophical

endeavour in Africa as a significant dilemma. One issue is: What is the relation between phenomenology and logic? And how does this question relate to the problem of African logic? The answer is that if logic becomes phenomenological, this would be the end of rationality, certainty, and correct reasoning. Moreover, confusing African philosophy with African Studies and relegating the principles of logic to an ethnocentric context or unwarranted subterfuge is not only anti-African but also unphilosophical in nature. The authentic path to African economic and political freedom lies in joining the global philosophical heritage and pursuing its development, while also seeking African identity. Hence, African philosophers must lead the way to African civilisation and development by conforming to the principles of logic, epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.

Doing African philosophy is not the same as engaging in African Studies, which developed its own autonomy, methodology, definitions and practices. The issue of African philosophy in Nigeria and other parts of Africa is the undue encroachment of African Studies, primarily due to deficits in critical thinking and logical analysis. Some like to focus on issues like African history, culture, politics, anthropology, and religion, rather than first-order philosophical methods. As Wikipedia explains: “African Studies is the study of Africa, especially the continent’s cultures and societies. The field includes the study of African history, demography, culture, politics, economy, languages, and religion”.

To properly engage with African philosophy, one must avoid conflating it with them and respect the boundary between the two. While much work has been done in African Studies, which has contributed to our understanding of the continent, greater progress can be made through philosophy—specifically African philosophy. This aligns with the orientation initiated by early African philosophers, which emerged from the debates—sometimes tortuous and volatile—during the classical period of ethnophilosophy.

Ethnophilosophy itself is a legitimate form of philosophy that spans cultures and epochs. However, in Africa, it persisted for too long without evolving into the critical and dialectical synthesis required to be recognised today as African philosophy. This dictionary, therefore, serves as an interface between the raw materials of African Studies, ethnophilosophy, and the philosophy of cultures, peoples, and societies. It also brings a critical, neutral, and first-order philosophical perspective, as outlined in this *Foreword* and the selected contributions.

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