

**LOGIC
AND
AFRICAN
PHILOSOPHY**

Seminal Essays on
African Systems of Thought

Edited by

Jonathan O. Chimakonam

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Series in Philosophy



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Dedication

In a continent ravaged by slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism, foreign religions, miseducation, bad education and numerous western-orchestrated wars, it is hard to come by people who still think for themselves. This book is dedicated to all Africans who weather the storms of western epistemic hegemony to think for themselves and to nurture the seed of *cognitive rebellion* in their communities.

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1. Hebga, M. Analysis 1958. Logic in Africa. *Philosophy Today*, 2.4: 222–229.
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My appreciation also goes to members of The Conversational Society of Philosophy (CSP) in different countries—a forum for developing and promoting African philosophy and intellectual history, for leading a new resurgence in original research in Africa.

Preface

Individuals in this world do not accidentally become logical in their speech. Being logical is a conscious act chiefly because it is a necessity. This necessity was imposed on all of us the moment we decided to constitute a community with a handful of norms to regulate our conducts and develop a language of communication. In other words, being logical was not primordially, an involuntary act that occurred naturally; it was a voluntary activity and an exercise of a specific intellectual capacity which the earliest community-person struggled consciously to demonstrate.

Nowadays, some philosophers and anthropologists talk about logic, especially in reference to the Greek-born Aristotle as if it were a trophy of the Western mind. Interestingly, and probably unbeknownst to these cultural braggarts, humankind, irrespective of geographical location, was already eminently logical and observing the principles of logic long before wise humans began spotting the coastal town of Ionia. These principles include the ones we have formulated today and the ones we are yet to formulate, Aristotle's noble contribution, and by no means lean, was in articulating and putting these principles of reasoning down on writing scrolls.

It is shocking, if not intellectually shuddering, that in the modern time, several thousands of years since humanity in different locations have been observing the principles of reasoning out of sheer necessity, some people come along to say, perhaps due to the overwhelming influence of the history of slave trade, and a litany of unwitting arguments to defend it, that those who have been victims of the transatlantic slave trade, of all things, are prelogical. Or, that the principles of reasoning which Aristotle merely wrote down are not present in their languages and are not observed in their cultures or that their psychology is different.

Ordinarily, such a thing as logic or being logical, which as I explained was primordially a necessity ought not to be in any academic debate. There should be a limit, and there is certainly a limit to academic freedom. Where it is not plausible to doubt or prove the humanity of humans, it is outright racism. As a result, the works of scholars like Georg Hegel, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, etc., should now be clearly labelled racist. It could make for trivial academic pleasure to argue over such claims that put the humanity of sections of the world in question. Still, the intentions and consequences of such claims remain despicable and opprobrious.

It is unfortunate that Africans in our age are now forced to prove their humanity by demonstrating the presence of logical principles in their languages, cultures and by showing that the contents of their minds and behaviours are consistent with those of racists who regard themselves as proper humans. In this debasing exercise, the Western iconoclast may have scored a petty victory, but it is humanity as a whole that has been brought to its knees. If a part of humanity in an age, for the reason of being slightly ahead of others in inventions could by dint of such accomplishment pronounce a section of humanity not human enough, then a bad precedence is set. In the future, which always harbours a lot of unknowns, the once deprecated section of humanity might rise to some stellar accomplishment and being full of themselves might reverse the trend and proclaim the inferiority of the other section that once reigned supreme.

Part of the reason for this anthology is to put the troubled Africa's intellectual history of the modern age in perspective specifically as it concerns the themes of logic, language and psychology. Some of the literature collected in this book which contains what was put forward by some Western racists and the fightback from some African thinkers are usually missing in history, sociology, philosophy and cultural studies curriculum in schools in Africa. Where some are spotted, they are hardly put into proper perspective that connects the thoughts back into early modern racism. I have grouped the essays into four parts and provided an introduction for each to link up the essays and bring out their sociological implications. I have also provided a general introduction to give an overview not only of the motivation and focus of each essay and group of essays but to put the essays in proper coherent historical order.

Not all the essays that qualify to be included in this project have been included. Various reasons account for the omission of some essays that ordinarily should have been part of this collection. Victor Ocaya's essay on "Logic in Acholi Language" and Edwin Etieyibo's essay that focuses on logic in Urhobo proverbs have both been left out because both essays were discussed elaborately by Keanu Koketso Mabalane and Edwin Etieyibo in their contribution on "the Question of Logic in Setswana Proverbs" in part two of the anthology. Gordon Hunnings' "Logic, language and culture" was omitted because all efforts to secure the copyright permission from the holder yielded no results. But the contributions of Godwin Sogolo, Meinrad Hebga and Uduma O. Uduma who in various ways offered a similar line of arguments more than compensate for this omission.

On the whole, this is a project on African intellectual history. It is expected that teachers in schools in Africa will expose their students to these readings to properly streamline their knowledge and understanding of African history and predicament. Some of those students would go on to become teachers, leaders, administrators, policymakers and some would hold executive positions in

various African countries. Without the knowledge of African intellectual history, it is difficult for such professionals to function in a way that will benefit the continent and liberate its peoples mentally, let alone solve some of the continent's teeming problems.

Pretoria
July 7, 2019

General Introduction

With the faculty of reason, humans can reason logically, all things being equal. To build a system of logic, however, requires some professional training in the field. This is not to suggest that those who have not acquired any form of training in logic are never able to build systems of logic, after all, Aristotle and George Boole did. But it may require an extra stroke of genius to be able to create something as intricate as a system of logic if one had not received sufficient training in the field.

If we approach a culture as university people, where no one has ever built a system of logic, especially in this modern age, it may strike us with surprise, and if care is not taken, we may begin to think quite in error, that folks in that culture have no capacity for logic, especially, if they appear ignorant of the laws of thought and in their daily lives and resolutions, demonstrate complete disregard for some of those laws we have grown to be familiar with. We would be compelled then to ask ourselves, if they do not often reason in line with the laws of thought, what does that portend? It is through thinking in this manner that some Western scholars like Lucien Levy-Bruhl arrived at the conclusion that the primitive people must be prelogical, which literally, by the prefix 'pre' could mean, 'having not attained the capacity for logical reasoning.' Any adult so described, is equated to an infant. So, by describing the primitive peoples as prelogical, Levy-Bruhl was craftily appealing to Georg Hegel's description of what he calls "Africa proper" as "...the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night" (1975: 174). So, contrary to general supposition, Levy-Bruhl did not say anything new; he merely called Hegel's dog by another name. To think that this manoeuvre has eluded many is amusing but what is not amusing is the assumption that because people have not developed a system of logic, then it means they lacked such a capacity; or, to think that people sometimes reason, quite contrary to some of the traditional laws of thought, then it implies that they have no ability for logical reasoning. This assumption, to put it mildly, is foolish and short-sighted.

Like many other human endeavours, logical reasoning has many paths. The discovery of one path does not close the door against others. Yes, we would have to summon the courage to say at some point that P is better than Q, but it would be forlorn to wildly conclude that Q does not exist or that a people who have found Q to be more viable for them cannot reason along the principles of P. There is a point at which Levy-Bruhl came around to this fact but dented it when he denies the primitive people of the ability to reason along the lines of Aristotle's logic and describes his erroneous understanding of their logic in a sub-human way as that of "mystical participation." It could be admissible to say that P is

better than Q in matters of context, but such marginal advantage should not inspire vile and sub-human derision. Like I already stated, the point at issue was the absence of any *book-based* system of logic in Africa at the time the Europeans arrived. But where there is the capacity to reason logically, there also is the capacity to construct systems of logic; it would only be a question of time.

Having realised the folly in Levy-Bruhl's campaign to brand certain peoples as prelogical, neo-Levy-Bruhlians now want to maintain a diluted thesis, that is, yes, African peoples reason logically and the laws of thought are present in their languages and cultures, but the absence of systems of logic in their pristine cultures means that they do not have the capacity to build systems. Unfortunately, this is as spurious as the first thesis. As my people from the Igbo country would say '*were ogbiri manye ewu, ma obu were ewu manye ogbiri, bu otu ihe*' that is, 'use the rope to tie the goat or use the goat to tie the rope amount to the same activity.' What would be proof that people who have the capacity to reason logically lack the ability to build systems of logic? Certainly, there is no proof for that, especially when we observe that it is the same rational capacity that is required for both activities.

It is in this manner that some scholars attempt to force African thinkers to a corner, insisting that what it makes sense to talk about is 'logic in Africa' and not 'African logic.' But if the former gestures at the observance of Aristotelian logic in Africa, the latter simply gestures at logical contributions from Africa in much the same way we comfortably talk about Polish, Chinese and Indian logics as contributions from those cultures. Why do some scholars insist that we cannot creditably talk about African logic? Richard Rorty calls it "cultural politics" (2007: 4).

Incidentally, cultural politics of this type is a game of language and psychology. I will first comment on language and later on psychology both of which consist the other two themes of this work connected to the theme of logic. With a perfectly constructed language structure, a people's accomplishments could be written off, edited out of history and distorted beyond recognition; their inventions could also be stolen and awarded to another people, and their efforts could be thwarted or disrupted. Language, in this way, could be violent.

So, it is easy to see the power and the value of language, something which the Enlightenment did not fully realise. Nothing compels action more than 'word' in the vagaries of its usage. The courage to use one's reason is not enough. The daring to communicate the products of reason is essential to the progress of reason itself. It is this daring that the human spirit found at the beginning of the twentieth century resulting in the century witnessing more violence than any other century in the history of the world. Some of the violent manifestations of this newly found language include; the Russian revolutions and many other revolutions and wars in different parts of the world culminating in the First and the Second World Wars. It

must be noted that what is commonly regarded as violence is nothing but language and war is the full expression of it. Violence is language! It is a language that resists or rebels against epistemic hegemony which is a castle built by absolutising reason. People do not indulge in violence for anything. It is a manner of speech—an expression of reflected thought. It is a powerful language which hitherto the twentieth century was used by a few who were privileged to have discovered its power. This is proof that though reason from the emergence of the wise humans had invested itself in the soils of every human culture, its germination and eventual maturation was disparate. Does it stimulate any ideas as to why the French had their revolution more than one hundred years before the Russians and the Chinese? Or, why the Congo reached the wisdom of sending children to school some six thousand years after ancient Babylonia? Yet, this is a simple matter of time. Simple, in the sense that reason has no ‘reason’ for time. It will make its journey, and it will reach its target irrespective of how long a time it takes. Thus, in this matter of time, we must be cautious not to legislate the ominous dichotomy of superior/inferior. For example, a man who enjoys the privilege of a lot of ‘firsts’ for the reason of having been born thirty years earlier than another, must also surrender the privilege of a lot of ‘lasts’ to the man born thirty years later. If, as common sense approves, all things being equal, the man who enjoys the privilege of having been born first, may not get the privilege of dying last. One thing that matters a lot, especially in these days of intercultural philosophy is not which particular manifestation of reason matures first, but whether each is able to eventually attain maturity. And this is the summary of my thesis: that people, in matters of logical constructions, are late to the party, does not mean they are not fit for the party.

From the preceding, we can tease out the theme of psychology in this collection. William Abraham, halfway into the twentieth century published a book with the curious title, *The Mind of Africa* (1962) where among others, he tried to peer into the reflexive frameworks in African cultures and describe the behaviours inspired by such frameworks. Many an African scholar in different ways have also attempted to describe what could be called the basic ideas undergirding the thinking and behaviours of people in different cultures in Africa before the European invasion. They dwelled on politics, economics, art, socials, archaeology, philosophy, literature and history to name but a few and some of the actors include, Cheikh Anta Diop, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Chinua Achebe, Julius Nyerere, Ngugi wa’ Thiongo, Chinweizu, K. A. Busia, Ifeanyi Menkiti, Kwame Gyekye, Kwasi Wiredu, T. U. Nwala, Obafemi Awolowo and Ali Mazrui, etc. However, it was Senghor in his *Psychology of the African Negro* that tried to give a direct account of how the African thinks and how their behaviours are influenced. But Senghor was responding to the positions in literature mainly produced by Westerners and which he felt did not represent the psychology of the African fairly. Unfortunately, some African scholars have found Senghor’s depiction of the

African mind questionable, if not dubious. That is, however, a subject for another work.

In this anthology, I have made selections of seminal papers in African logic which themes also cut across language and psychology, and grouped the essays under four different connected parts. Part one titled “Logic and Traditional Thought, the Origin of a Controversy” brings together essays that inaugurated the controversy whether there is logic in traditional African cultures, the nature of the mind and behaviour of African peoples, how Africans think and describe the world, etc. Contributions from Meinrad Hebga, Leopold Senghor, Robin Horton and J. E. Wiredu make up this group. I have analysed each of these essays with reference to the focus of the group in the introduction to part one. In part two titled “Logic in African Languages and Cultures” and which is necessitated by the discussions in part one, I assembled essays that speak to this theme. The question that unites the essays in this part is: are the laws of thought present in African languages and cultures? Contributors whose essays address this question include Godwin Sogolo, Chukwuemeka Nze, Ademola Fayemi, Keanu Koketso Mabalane and Edwin Etieyibo as well as Chris Ijiomah. Their individual arguments have been discussed in the introduction to part two. Part three titled “African logic, the Debates” collects essays that engaged in a full-scale debate on whether there can be such a thing as African logic. This debate is due to matters arising from the discussions in part two. If it is possible, what would its systems be like? The introduction to part three explains the arguments of each debater in line with the theme of the group. Finally, part four is titled “The System builders: Contributions from the Calabar School.” The three contributions in this group came from members of the Calabar School, an influential Department of Philosophy based at the University of Calabar in eastern Nigeria whose main goal was to pick up the gauntlet thrown in the preceding part three to formulate systems of African logic. The contributors include Chris Ijiomah, Innocent Asouzu and Jonathan Chimakonam. These three developed three similar but different systems of African logic to open a new chapter in African intellectual history.

I recommend this book to all students, researchers and teachers in African philosophy and intellectual history, and indeed, to the sundry fields of African studies. The readings assembled here, which are by no means exhaustive, are such that would stimulate one to new levels of thinking.

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Part 1:

Introduction: Logic and Traditional Thought, the Origin of a Controversy

In the century following the Enlightenment Age, a problem arose, one that was to degenerate into a controversy in the fields of philosophy and psychology. It was how to determine, on account of cultural and world-view studies of various sub-Saharan African peoples, the nature of their minds, whether they were capable of reasoning along with the tradition of Aristotle or have their own unique logic. The problem with this programme was that it was a two-edged sword. If it can be established that the sub-Saharan African peoples are incapable of following Aristotle's logical reasoning or that they have their own unique logic, then, either way, it would imply that they are intellectually different from the Europeans. The problem does not lie in the nature of this *difference* because it could be a difference in terms of degree. The problem lies in the direction of the difference presupposed. It could be a difference in substance which classifies a section of humanity as sub-humans or non-humans.

European anthropological research conclusions¹ of the early modern time have stratified humanity into superior and inferior races and placed the European stock at the apex. In contrast, the sub-Saharan stock was placed far below the European and only above the Amerindian stock. So, the European is the bar. Thus, if it was established that the sub-Saharan peoples were incapable of following the principles of Aristotelian logic and as a result, their reasoning can be measured with a different standard of logic, whether this logic is openly called inferior or not, the users of such a logic are inferior. Now, as this question of logic is a question of the intellect, it would be easy to conclude straightforwardly that the users of this *other* standard of logic are inferior to the European stock. In any case, this was what the early modern anthropological research in Europe from Carolus Linnaeus, Governor Pownall, Abbé de la Croix, John Hunter, Zimmermann, Meiners, Klügel to Metager, etc., (Blumenbach in Bernasconi and Lott 2000: 29-31) established through the racial classification of humanity.

¹ See Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. 1795. In Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott, Eds. 2000. 27-37.

Based on the preceding, philosophers like Georg Hegel, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, etc., who came after, fortified this racial stratification and apportioned to the African, an intellect that is inferior to that of the European, and crystallising in the first half of the twentieth century in the works of Lucien Levy-Bruhl, the stage was set for a big controversy. Levy-Bruhl had concluded that primitive peoples, and by this, he means all traditional peoples were pre-logical which suggests that they were not incapable of logical reasoning completely except that their logic is of a different standard, something he describes as 'logic of mystical participation.' By this logic, primitive peoples contradicted themselves almost all of the time.

The first part of this anthology consists of four essays that variously respond to the poser above yielded by the works of the European anthropologists and philosophers already mentioned about the psychology of the African. The first essay by Meinrad Hebga published in 1958 responded robustly to the poser. Hebga demonstrates that the sub-Saharan African peoples are not only capable of following Aristotle's logical reasoning, he demonstrates that they are also capable of formulating a different but not unique logic to explain certain aspects of thinking which were not covered in the Aristotelian framework. He shows that the new system would be universalisable, ending the speculation that Africans have an inferior type of intellect. With this idea of different systems, Hebga quashed the idea that the Aristotelian model appropriated by the West was the only universal tool. He satirised this supposition as "[T]he dogma of one standard and of one all-embracing prototype for civilisation and culture..." (Hebga 1958: 222).

The second essay by Leopold Senghor was published in 1962. In it, Senghor did not admit that the African peoples are incapable of following the principles of Aristotelian logic but, he shows that they are also capable of a different type of reasoning that arises from emotion called 'intuitive reason', something he presents as unique to them, or at least, a framework he did not universalise. For failing to universalise this framework, Senghor appears to support the proposal that the sub-Saharan peoples have a unique intellect. For this, many have criticised his work as placing the African in a difficult position.

It was this failure to universalise his new framework that Robin Horton in the third essay published in 1967 latched onto, to conclude that Africans follow a different and localised type of reasoning altogether which according to him, Levy-Bruhl had captured succinctly as 'logic of mystical participation.' Horton, in his essay, attempted to compare traditional African thought and Western science. He employed data from his anthropological studies to demonstrate that the former was a closed model of thinking that cannot be questioned, and the latter was an open model of thinking that admits of

criticisms. On the basis of this distinction, he claimed that sub-Saharan peoples were incapable of following Aristotle's logical formulation because their world-view is closed to critical thinking, the type that admits of the laws of thought.

However, in the fourth essay by J. E. Wiredu,² published in 1976, and which is a rejoinder to Horton (1967), Wiredu shows with examples that the sub-Saharan African peoples reason logically and in accordance to Aristotle's model. He debunks the idea of a unique logical framework which Levy-Bruhl alludes to, which Senghor unwittingly subscribed to and which Horton erroneously established. Wiredu faults Horton's conclusion on some scores: first, he shows that Horton's comparison of traditional African thought with Western science was a mismatch. Second, he shows that Horton ignored the fact that Europe once was at the stage of traditional thinking, which is dominated by supernaturalism. Third, he shows that thinking is evolutionary and different peoples evolve at different paces. Fourth, he shows that for Horton's comparison to be accurate, he should have compared, for example, traditional African thought with traditional Western thought. On these scores, Wiredu appears to have countered Horton's arguments successfully. But the controversy was only just beginning. I invite the reader to savour what for me is a less discussed, less understood and much-misinterpreted aspect of modern African intellectual history. The teacher is expected to take their students through these readings connecting the racist ideas from early modern time down to Levy-Bruhl, and unfolding their implications from the four essays in this part of the anthology.

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- Hebga, M. 1958. Logic in Africa. *Philosophy Today*, 2.4: 222-229.

²Who later changed his name to Kwasi Wiredu.

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