A Note from the Series Editor

We were shocked and saddened to learn of the death of Seth Oppong on February 17, 2024. In his brief 41-year lifetime, Seth became a prolific author and researcher, and was a champion of Indigenous African psychology. Respected, admired, and loved by colleagues and students alike, he made his mark, not only in Africa, but internationally, as well. Seth was known for his kindness and wisdom, and an inspiration to those whom he encouraged and supported. We are fortunate to have this last work in the Elements series, and to see that he touches the lives of others one more time. We hope we have done justice to it in the final editing as it comes to print.

Kenneth D. Keith, April, 2024

1 Conceptual Foundations

1.1 Definitions

A good place to start an Element on Indigenous psychology in Africa (IPA) is to consider which terms are used synonymously with IPA. I have been criticised for using Indigenous psychology in Africa (IPA) rather than African psychology (AP). For instance, Augustine Nwoye takes issue with the use of 'IP' on the basis that it turns the limelight on the study of IP instead of AP in the current scholarship in psychology (Augustine Nwoye, personal communication, 7 July 2023). For Nwoye, the use of IP inadvertently gives the impression that AP is all about the study of culture and not actually psychology qua psychology; he argues that AP is concerned with not only the psychology of the pre-colonial Africans (African Indigenous psychology) but also the psychology and perturbations of contemporary or postcolonial Africans (Augustine Nwoye, personal communication, 7 July 2023). As much as I agree with Augustine Nwoye's concerns about the use of IP, the terminology I have used is 'IP in Africa'. Therefore, we shall use the acronym 'IPA' instead of 'IP' in Africa. This is to say that as much as Western psychology is a form of IP, IPA refers to a distinct body of psychological knowledge about and for Africa that contributes to global psychology in expanding the understanding of the human nature of all *Homo sapiens* (Oppong, 2022a). In this regard, IPA is used interchangeably with 'African psychology' (AP) and 'pan-African psychology' (PAP) (Oppong, 2022a). But what is AP really? Table 1 lists some of the definitions in use that can be applied to what we can call AP.

These definitions seem to share certain characteristics. All the definitions somewhat agree that AP or IPA (1) is an approach to doing psychological science in Africa, (2) emphasises the role of African culture, and (3) concerns theorising and empirical research in psychology. Thus, they all appear to say

Table 1 Selected definitions for African psychology/Indigenous psycho

Term	Definition
Indigenous psychology, general	'an approach to research in psychology which stresses the i research being grounded in the conditions of the researc society and culture' (p. 1)
African psychology	'the systematic and informed study of the complexities of h life, culture and experience in the pre- and postcolonial A (p. 57)
Pan-African psychology	'a branch of psychology where the population of interest is African origin, and/or where the target population resides continent of Africa or in the Diaspora' (p. 10)
African psychology	'ways of situating oneself in the field of psychology in rela from Africa' (p. 274)
IPA	'an orientation that adopts a culture-conscious approach to of research questions, design, data analysis, and interpre results' (p. 956)

that AP must be embedded in the culture of the researchers to build up meaningful and locally relevant explanations for the behaviour, emotions, and cognition that underlie applications to the people in that locality. This also means that AP suggests research ought to begin from the culture rather than using lenses borrowed from outside the culture. Though Allwood is a non-African psychologist, his definition of IP serves a useful pedagogical purpose in outlining what IP generally is. This is consistent with Oppong's (2016) view that AP should not reject everything Western by virtue of just being Western but must critically review and use what may be considered useful.

A key question about IPA is who constitutes the people about whom and for whose benefit this psychological knowledge is being developed. Using Mazrui's (2005) classificatory scheme of Africans of the soil (including North Africans) and Africans by blood (including African Americans), Oppong (2016) identified four target groups for IP in Africa. They are (1) Africans by blood and of the soil (e.g., Ghana, Botswana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, etc.); (2) Africans by blood but not of the soil (Black Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, etc.); (3) Africans not by blood but of the soil (mostly the non-Black inhabitants of North Africa and various non-Black populations in different parts of the continent of Africa); and (4) Africans not by blood and not of the soil (naturalised citizens of various African countries). Towards this end, Oppong (2016, p. 10) argues that IPA is an indigenous psychology in which both Africans of the soil and by blood are the

> target population due to their shared history, conditions of living, values, and traditions. These shared attributes include slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, coloniality, racism, poverty, diseases, damaged self-identity, spirituality, art, communalism, respect for elderly, nature-human harmony, and a host of others.

Another important question to raise and respond to is: is IPA the study of the psychology of Indigenous peoples in Africa? The United Nations (UN, 2004, p. 2) defines Indigenous peoples as peoples and nations that:

> hav[e] a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.

There have been some debates as to whether the term 'Indigenous' has the same meaning in Africa as elsewhere. The key argument is that 'all Africans are indigenous to Africa in the sense that they were there before the European

colonialists arrived and that they have been subject to sub-ordination during colonialism' (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights [ACHPR] & International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [IWGIA], 2005, p. 88). Thus, it assumed that it is not proper to ascribe 'Indigenous' status to a few communities. However, ACHPR and IWGIA (2005, p. 89) argued that recognition of Indigenous peoples in Africa ought to be based on whether the culture and lifeways of the groups that identify as Indigenous peoples can be differentiated significantly from 'the dominant society and their cultures[, which] are under threat in some cases to the point of extinction'. Therefore, it must be understood that Africa's stance on Indigenous peoples differs from other parts of the world. As a result, ACHPR and IWGIA (2005) recognised certain groups as Indigenous communities (see Table 2).

Nonetheless, IPA should not be assumed to be about only those who identify as or were identified by ACHPR and IWGIA (2005) as Indigenous peoples but rather as targeting every African as the object of its study. This is because, by the very definition from the UN (2004), all Africans are Indigenous. However, the use of the term Indigenous peoples should be reserved for those identified in Table 2 to draw attention to their marginalisation in contemporary Africa. Therefore, the use of the term IPA must be understood to communicate that one is studying, more or less, a truly authentic psychology of Africans that has not been adulterated by Western influence. However, it is not, or should not be considered, a form of romanticising the African 'glorious' past. Instead, IPA is about the contemporary life lived and experienced by Africans with meanings derived from the past to guide both current and future behaviours, thoughts, and

Table 2 Examples of Indigenous peoples/communities in Africa

Category	Community/People
Hunter-gatherers	Pygmies of the Great Lakes Region, the San of Southern Africa, the Hadzabe of Tanzania, and the Ogiek of Kenya.
Pastoralists and agro-pastoralist	The Pokot of Kenya and Uganda, the Barabaig of Tanzania, the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, the Samburu, Turkana, Rendille, Orma, and Borana of Kenya and Ethiopia, the Karamojong of Uganda, the isolated pastoralist communities in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, the Touareg and Fulani of Mali, Burkina-Faso, and Niger, and the Mbororo in Cameroon and other West African countries.

Source: ACHPR and IWGIA (2005, pp. 15–19); African Development Bank Group (2016, pp. 10–11)

emotional expressions (see Nwoye, 2015a; Oppong, 2022a; Weber et al., 2021). More forcefully, Mpofu (2002, p. 182) reminds us that the critics of cross-cultural studies and applications of theories (in this case, critics of Western hegemonic psychology in Africa) do not have to 'have a romantic view of their own or other cultures as cut in stone or unchanging'. This is because such criticism has 'the limitation of failing to take regard of how cultures evolve under their own impetus and in interaction with other cultures' (Mpofu, 2002, p. 182). He further argues that even 'if psychological theories unique to African settings were developed, they would still not be wholly applicable to all African societies and would have to contend with much the same criticisms as currently leveled against those developed in Western societies' (Mpofu, 2002, p. 182). This is a good reminder that 'Africa is not a museum', to borrow from Weber et al. (2021, p. 1), and that culture is dynamic.

I share similar sentiments about the unfortunate romanticism of African pasts. This is a view that particularly applies in cases where Western scholars interested in the psychology of Africans and African culture tend to have a romantic view of African culture and attempt to revive a long-forgotten past. For instance, Allwood (2018) was fascinated by our advocacy for the eradication of what we called outmoded cultural practices (Oppong, Asante, & Oppong, 2012). I wish here to reiterate the caution given by Mpofu (2002) that African culture is not static while 'Africa is not a museum' (Weber et al., 2021, p. 1). That we advocate for an AP does not mean we are not alive to the fact that every culture has a set of harmful and progressive practices, to which Africa is no exception. Thus, we call for the eradication of harmful cultural practices in order to promote the well-being of the African in the modern world. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with borrowing useful ideas from other cultures (see Ahuma, 1905) as long as it promotes community and individual well-being. However, the process of eradication should be done in a respectful manner so that the community does not vehemently resist the transformation. It may also be useful to take a functional perspective – borrowing from sociology – that considers the functions of each harmful cultural practice and works with and through the community to formulate a harmless substitution or replacement that prevents disorientation among community members. This is often lacking in attempts to eradicate harmful cultural practices in African communities by Western outsiders.

1.2 Centrality of Culture

The relationship between culture and behaviour is well documented (Sam, 2014). The question of culture leads one to wonder if there is anything like an African culture. Does Africa have a monolithic culture? I do not think that there

is a monolithic African culture per se. Culture should also not be used in a vague manner to mean any material differences between or among people. Spencer-Oatey (2008) considered culture a shared set of assumptions and orientations to life that has the potential to influence behaviour and its meanings among a collective. Further, Kluckhohn and Kelly (1945) defined culture as the 'designs for living . . . which exist at any given time as potential guides for . . . [human] behaviour' (p. 97). It is due to the use of mere material differences as an expression of culture that led Poortinga (2021) to argue for dispensing with the term 'culture' in (cross-)cultural psychology for its vagueness when used psychologically. Thus, Poortinga (2021) believes that culture ought to be 'defined in terms of specific variables or behavior domains rather than in terms of some poorly defined part of the behavior repertoire' (p. 25).

In questioning the idea of a monolithic African culture, Allwood (2018, 2019) asked if: (1) there are common traits across the African continent, and (2) it is scientifically feasible to identify such continental traits. There are only about three ways to resolve this problem. First, we can consider personal experiences of an African traversing the continent. When an African traverses the continent, one cannot help but see the similarities underneath the *visible* differences that you would find in behaviours, belief systems, emotional expressions, and cognitions. In this sense, one can argue that, although there are *visible* differences in behavioural patterns, they appear to converge around common themes that make one African not very different from another. The *visible* differences are possibly due to differences in the physical environment given that culture represents a guide for living. Thus, if you find yourself in a forest area where the soil is viable for tubers (cassava, yam, etc.), you will evolve a tuber-based food habit. If you find yourself in an area where the soil is suitable for growing cotton, you will produce cotton-based fabrics for your use. Though these differences (food habits and style of clothing) are part of culture, they are often the direct responses to the physical environmental conditions, and they do not represent shared assumptions and orientations to life. These responses to the physical environment may also show up in the understanding of the fundamental relationship between humans and between humans and the environment. However, these assumptions about human–environment relations should not be taken to mean they are at the core of culture. Rather, they act as constraints on how one can make sense of one's world. They are important but they may not be the essence of the culture.

Second, we can also view the question of a monolithic African culture through a theoretical framework. One of the useful theories of culture that serves this purpose is Schein's (1984, 2004) levels-of-culture theory. This theory is useful because it helps to analyse culture at different levels. Within

this theory, there are three levels of analysis of culture, namely, (1) observable artefacts and behaviours, (2) espoused values and beliefs, and (3) underlying assumptions (Oppong & Strader, 2022; Schein, 1984, 2004). When one traverses the continent of Africa, one notes there are observable differences in terms of clothes, language, food, arts, parenting styles, and a host of other things that we can see, hear, and feel (Oppong & Strader, 2022). Needless to say, these observable patterns reflect the most *visible* level of cultural artefacts. However, most people end their analysis at this level and presume that these African cultures are indeed different. A deeper analysis of African cultures at the *invisible* (below-the-surface) levels of espoused values and beliefs and underlying assumptions tends to reveal some commonalities across the continent. These are commonalities in values and assumptions with which keen observers are often confronted. Behaviour might differ from one African community to another but the purpose it serves may essentially be the same. Though it is advisable not to think of a monolithic African culture, there are some commonalities at deeper levels of analysis beyond what is visible or observable. Consistent with this perspective, Mkhize (2013, pp. 34–5) argues that

> African scholars are not in agreement about the existence of unifying African worldview or metaphysics . . . Although there may not be a unifying African metaphysics, there is nevertheless *an approach to reality* [emphasis added] shared by a number of Africans. Its central tenets about beliefs about God, the universe and notions of causality, person and time.
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> Thus, there is an African approach to reality that appears different from other cultures.

Last, we can also answer this question based on emerging theorising and empirical work from Africa-based scholars. At the level of theorising, Gyekye's (2003) philosophical work is relevant here. He drew on maxims from diverse African traditions to construct a set of African cultural values. Specifically, Gyekye (2003) drew on maxims from ethnic groups across Africa such as the Akan (Ghana, West Africa), Ewe (Ghana, West Africa), Yoruba (Nigeria, West Africa), Igbos (Nigeria, West Africa), Benin (Nigeria, West Africa), Basotho (Lesotho, Southern Africa), Ndebele (Zimbabwe, Southern Africa), and Swahili (Kenya, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Mozambique; East Africa). Together, the languages spoken by these ethnic groups cut across four language families identified by linguistics as those most widely spoken in various parts of the continent: Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic, and Indo-European. This is very important to note because language is a reflection of one's worldview (see Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; Whorf, 1956). Thus, language is a sort of institutional memory of a group of people,

though it is always evolving. Given the various language families represented in Gyekye's (2003) philosophical exploration, we can confidently say that he covered most of Africa to produce African cultural values, which he outlined as, namely, (1) religious values, (2) values of humanity and brotherhood, (3) communal and individualistic values, (4) moral values, (5) family values, (6) economic values including African conceptions of work ethic, (7) chieftaincy and political values, (8) aesthetic values, (9) values for knowledge and wisdom, (10) human rights values, and (11) values for ancestorship and tradition. Together, these values help to understand the African approach to reality. And these values are, more or less, the same as those detected by the keen observer despite the visible differences in behavioural patterns. It is like saying: we are the same at heart.

Furthermore, Oppong (2020b) employed ethnographic studies on cognitive abilities in Africa to formulate an African conception of cognitive abilities, the so-named model of valued human cognitive abilities. I employed ethnographic studies done in Zambia (Southern Africa), Kenya (East Africa), and Togo (West Africa). Like Gyekye (2003), I employed the same four language families (Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic, and Indo-European) with the advantages of wider coverage in this systematic review. This work does not directly relate to cultural values per se, but the evidence can be taken to mean that it is possible to identify commonalities across the continent of Africa. Again, if we take values to mean that which is important for a group of people and guides their actions, then the formulation of the African conceptions of cognitive abilities may also be seen as those aspects of cognitive abilities important to Africans and that guide their actions towards developing those abilities in themselves and the next generation of Africans. Taken together, these projects suggest that there may be an African approach to reality. So, to answer the question of whether or not there is a monolithic African culture, it is a 'no', but there seems to be an African approach to reality that underlies the diverse ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling across the continent.

On a final note, we need to address the question of the status of African Indigenous peoples' culture in AP. As argued earlier, ACHPR and IWGIA (2005, p. 89) advocate for the recognition of Indigenous peoples based on whether the culture and lifeways of the groups that identify as Indigenous peoples can be differentiated significantly from 'the dominant society and their cultures[, which] are under threat in some cases to the point of extinction' (see 1.1 Definitions). As a result, there is a danger that African Indigenous peoples' culture would be further marginalised, resulting in double marginalisation. For instance, the San People of Botswana view their culture as under threat and are concerned about the limited integration of their cultural values