

In Memoriam of Professor Seth Oppong (1982-2024)

Johnny Andoh-Arthur^{} and Kwaku Oppong Asante^{}

Professor Seth Oppong, a young, vibrant and much respected Professor of Psychology who made his strongest mark advancing Indigenous African Psychology, died unexpectedly on February 17, 2024. Until his untimely death, Seth was a Full Professor at the University of Botswana and served as a Research Associate at University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. He was also the Secretary of the Pan African Psychology Union (PAPU). Prior to being a faculty at University of Botswana, Seth worked as an Associate Professor at the Robert Tubman University, Liberia having earlier obtained his PhD and MPhil Degrees in Industrial Psychology at the Department of Psychology, University of Ghana. His thirst for reading and questioning strengthened his resolve to demonstrate that the African mind is equally capable of original thought. To give meaning to such a desire, he tried to develop two theories during his first year at the undergraduate level at the University of Ghana, Legon. He was later to spend a considerable length of time in his young life theorizing in psychology, the aim of which was to give epistemic agency to indigenous psychological knowledge and concepts from Africa.

Professor Oppong's theoretical contribution included Biocultural theory of personhood, where he deployed ethno-psychological perspectives of the Akan people of Ghana and La Côte d'Ivoire to demonstrate that personhood is achieved and not a given. He articulates the view that among the Akans, a human being is not at birth endowed with personhood. Instead one works towards achieving this status throughout life (Oppong, 2023b). This formulation, according to him "recognises that there are certain developmental tasks or societal expectations that one must negotiate to become a person" (Oppong, 2024, p.25). The individual is thus required to work to achieve personhood status by negotiating societal expectations that are "age-appropriate and co-determined by an interaction between the individual's physical development and society" (Oppong, 2024, p.25). He further delineated seven stages of becoming a person within the Akan ethnopsychology.

His appetite for theorizing was also seen in the area of intelligence. His model of Valued Human Cognitive Abilities identifies three interrelated components of cognitive abilities from an African perspective, namely: cognitive competence, wisdom, and

socio-emotional competence. In his view, cognitive competence is similar to Western psychologists' notion of "intelligence". He asserts the view forcefully that for Africans, wisdom and socioemotional competence are acknowledged in the use of cognitive competence due mainly to the ethic of social interconnectedness in African societies. He sharply contrasts this from the individualist orientations where emphasis is put on cognitive competence over socio-emotional competencies. Professor Oppong also propounded the Risk Chance Process Model in which he posited that accident likely results from faulty risk perceptions. The model states that "faulty risk perceptions tend to lead to human error; and that these human errors tend to cause one to engage in risky behaviour, and the risk behaviours often result in risk exposure or exposure to hazardous conditions. Once exposed to hazardous conditions, there is a higher likelihood that the risk exposure eventually leads to injuries or accidents" (Oppong, 2011, Oppong 2024, p.28). Professor Oppong also formulated Sekyi Puzzle of Modernity to guide indigenisation of knowledge, especially within the Majority World (MW). His advice to colleague African psychologist, well-articulated in the model, is that while we attempt to modernise, we should only borrow what is excellent in Western civilisation and keep the cultural values that have kept African societies alive till date.

One gleans from his scholarship a desire to see mainstream psychology open up, accept, and incorporate knowledge from the majority world settings, including Africa. This, he evinces in his concept of "Epistemological Allyship" (EA), which was borne out of his concern that the anti-racism literature tended to "blame White people for most things without any attempt to recognise the role the marginalised plays in their marginalization" (Oppong, 2024, p. 31). Professor Oppong, using the concept of EA, advocated strongly for a "bi-directional relationships in collaborations between academics from the Majority World (AMWs) and influential scholars in the Minority World who 'genuinely want to see another human progress rather than seeing the one in need of assistance as merely a member of a marginalized group' (Oppong, 2023a, p. 76). He further suggested ways EA can be achieved including mentorship, reading and citing sources from the Majority World, and funding and sub-funding.

Seth Oppong has used his short life to make substantial advocacy and contribution towards improving psychological science that reflects and responds to the needs and aspiration of indigenous people. This, in his view, is achievable through genuine collaboration between psychologists of the West and those in Majority World. He gave meaning to this work by working and serving variously as international visiting research scholar to many universities and institutions including North Carolina State University, Raleigh. He was a Carnegie Scholar at University of Ghana. Professor Oppong co-authored a practical resource on how to enhance cultural relevance of Early Child Development (ECD) interventions in Africa. He created the Characterological Interpersonal Coping Styles Diagnostics and co-authored a Soft Skills Assessment Scale (SSAS) for use in Africa. He is best known for his work on history, critical, cultural, and indigenous/African psychology; epistemological violence and decolonising early child development in Africa.

The outpouring of tributes from across the world soon upon his death testifies of his solid contribution to Psychology. The tributes also came as true memoriam for a young African scholar who defied the odds to make his strong mark. It was thus not surprising when Kenneth D. Keith, the Series Editor of Cambridge Press that published his latest book “Indigenous Psychology of Africa, had this to say

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 (Oppong, 2024, p.1).

Seth was an enthusiastic, charismatic and passionate individual, and we are grateful to have had the opportunity to know him as a colleague and a friend. He was truly extraordinary and irreplaceable. Professor Seth Oppong’s rich contribution to psychology in Africa will be deeply missed and will always be remembered.

ORCID

Johnny Andoh-Arthur  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7036-1835>

Kwaku Oppong Asante   <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0206-3326>

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