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Semantic Restitution and the Decolonization of Philosophy in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates a central aporia within the project of conceptual decolonization in African philosophy: how may indigenous conceptual resources be critically recovered without either subordinating them to inherited Western categories or reifying them as remnants of an allegedly pristine precolonial order? Táíwò's critique of authenticity-driven decolonization renders this problem especially acute by insisting that African intellectual agency consists not in custodianship of an uncontaminated past but in the capacity for appropriation, adaptation, transformation, and innovation. Methodologically, the paper reconceptualizes this tension through semantic restitution, understood as a critical-reconstructive procedure comprising genealogical retrieval, semantic mapping, contextual validation, philosophical elaboration, and contemporary rearticulation. Against readings that construe Wiredu's conceptual decolonization as merely negative, the paper demonstrates, with Wiredu and Futter, that its critical and reconstructive moments are internally complementary. The Akan discourse of nokware and nea ete saa further demonstrates that linguistic non-equivalence need not signify conceptual deficiency; rather, it can disclose alternative configurations of epistemic and normative relations, while Bedu-Addo's critique establishes the necessity of contextual and usage-sensitive reconstruction. The paper concludes that semantic restitution offers a non-essentialist mode of conceptual recovery that preserves African agency while enabling indigenous concepts to participate critically in contemporary and intercultural philosophy.

1. Introduction

The contemporary project of African philosophy cannot be separated from the historical conditions under which African intellectual life was classified, translated, taught and rendered intelligible within colonial institutions. Yet the philosophical consequences of colonialism are not exhausted by a simple opposition between an authentic African conceptual order and an alien Western one. The more difficult question concerns the status of concepts after historical contact: how should a philosopher distinguish inherited conceptual authority from philosophical warrant when the vocabulary through which African thought is now articulated has itself been shaped by translation, education, institutional power, and intercultural exchange? The history of African philosophy is consequently also a history of contested attempts to define African intellectual identity without reducing philosophy to either cultural documentation or the repetition of externally authorised categories (Masolo, 1994). Kwasi Wiredu's project of conceptual decolonization occupies a central position in this problem because it highlights the conceptual effects of colonial education while refusing the conclusion that African philosophy must become intellectually insular. Wiredu's programme requires a critical interrogation of inherited categories, but it also requires the philosophical exploitation of African conceptual resources and the domestication of forms of inquiry developed elsewhere (Wiredu, 1996; Wiredu, 2002). The positive dimension matters because it prevents conceptual

decolonization from collapsing into a merely subtractive operation. The philosophical task is not simply to remove concepts judged foreign; it is to establish the conditions under which inherited, indigenous and newly appropriated concepts can become objects of reflective choice. However, Táíwò's (2022) critique places a necessary constraint on this project. He objects to forms of decolonization discourse that turn colonialism into a master explanatory principle and that, through appeals to authenticity, treat African intellectuals as custodians of a prescribed cultural past rather than as agents capable of appropriating, adapting, synthesising, and transforming ideas (Táíwò, 2022). This objection is not merely political. It is methodological. A conception of decolonization that determines in advance which concepts Africans may legitimately use risks reproducing, in another register, the heteronomy it claims to overcome.

The present paper therefore does not defend semantic restitution as a return to an original conceptual state. Nor does it oppose Táíwò by treating colonial influence as philosophically decisive in itself. Its thesis is narrower: if Wiredu's positive programme is taken seriously, and if Táíwò's demand that African agency remain primary is accepted, then the reconstructive work requires a more explicit account of how semantic resources are to be retrieved, mapped, tested, criticised, and rearticulated. Semantic restitution names that methodological account. Its object is neither purity nor provenance as such, but the recovery of conceptual intelligibility and philosophical agency under conditions of historical change.

2. Conceptual Decolonization: Critique, Reconstruction and Agency

2.1 Wiredu Beyond a Merely Negative Model

Characterizing Wiredu's conceptual decolonization as merely negative would be misleading. The negative moment is real: Wiredu seeks to identify and critically dislodge conceptual formations that have acquired authority through colonial inheritance rather than through reflective endorsement. But this critical operation is inseparable from a constructive ambition. In *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, Wiredu describes the positive side of the project in terms of the judicious exploitation of indigenous conceptual schemes in philosophical reflection, while presenting conceptual elimination as its negative counterpart (Wiredu, 1996). His position is therefore not adequately captured by a model of intellectual purification.

Futter's detailed reconstruction is especially important here because it prevents a criticism of Wiredu from attacking a position weaker than the one Wiredu actually occupies. Futter distinguishes phases of exegesis, evaluation, and construction in Wiredu's account: exegesis concerns the recovery and articulation of what a community thinks; evaluation concerns critical assessment; and construction concerns the development of positive philosophical research from the materials so examined (Futter, 2023). On this reconstruction, construction cannot itself be understood as a process of divestiture: it is positive philosophy. The negative and positive dimensions are therefore internally related but not identical. Semantic restitution takes this distinction as a starting point rather than as an objection to Wiredu. This clarification however changes the philosophical problem. The question is not whether Wiredu reconstructs or merely negates; the textual evidence establishes that he does both. The question is how reconstruction can be methodologically disciplined once the philosopher moves from recognizing conceptual distortion to elaborating an indigenous conceptual resource. What warrants a proposed reconstruction? How can linguistic evidence be distinguished from the interpreter's theoretical vocabulary? When does translation illuminate a conceptual relation, and when does it silently impose one? These are questions of method rather than questions about whether African concepts deserve philosophical attention.

Futter's reconstruction, however, generates a further difficulty for the present argument. He concludes that Wiredu's account of conceptual decolonisation is, at its central points, largely indistinguishable from philosophy itself: the procedures of separating, examining, evaluating, and reconstructing concepts can be understood as ordinary philosophical activity rather than as a method unique to decolonisation (Futter, 2023). This objection cannot simply be enlisted in support of semantic restitution; it must also be answered by it. If conceptual decolonisation becomes indistinguishable from philosophy once its reconstructive dimension is made explicit, semantic restitution would face the same difficulty if it merely renamed competent conceptual analysis. Semantic restitution answers this challenge not by claiming that its individual operations are unprecedented, but by specifying a distinctive methodological configuration. Its distinctiveness lies in the ordered conjunction of genealogical retrieval, semantic mapping, contextual validation, philosophical elaboration, and contemporary rearticulation. The procedure begins from concepts whose intelligibility has been historically mediated by translation, colonial categorisation, or conceptual substitution; reconstructs their semantic relations from linguistic and contextual evidence; subjects proposed meanings to usage-testing; places the reconstructed field under philosophical criticism; and finally requires its re-entry into a contemporary intercultural problem. The anti-essentialist constraint is equally

constitutive: provenance supplies an evidential starting point but never a criterion of truth. Semantic restitution therefore does not claim a new kind of reasoning; it claims a more determinate procedure for a historically specific philosophical task.

2.2 *Táíwò and the Agency Constraint*

Táíwò's intervention supplies a strong reason to reject authenticity as a methodological criterion. He argues that contemporary decolonization discourse can become a vehicle for performing authenticity and morality, thereby suffocating African thought and denying the agency of African intellectuals to appropriate, adapt, and synthesise ideas (Táíwò, 2022). The crucial distinction is between historical influence and present determination: the fact that a conceptual vocabulary has colonial genealogies does not entail that those African thinkers who employ it are intellectually governed by colonialism. The implication for conceptual reconstruction is substantial. An African philosopher need not demonstrate the indigenous pedigree of every concept before being entitled to use it. Wiredu himself allows this space for appropriation: where an imported idea survives critical examination, it may be absorbed into an African conceptual matrix, with the indigenous point of view adjusted or extended where necessary (Wiredu, 1996; Wiredu, 2002). The decisive criterion is therefore reflective judgment, not cultural provenance alone. Semantic restitution accepts this agency constraint by refusing to make indigeneity a sufficient condition of philosophical legitimacy. It instead concerns the history, semantic relations, inferential possibilities, and philosophical functions of concepts. A foreign concept may be retained, transformed, domesticated, or rejected; an indigenous concept may likewise be retained, transformed, criticised, or rejected. What matters is that these operations remain acts of philosophical judgment rather than performances of cultural loyalty.

3. Semantic Restitution: Meaning, Scope, and Method

3.1 *What Is Being Restituted?*

The metaphor of restitution is dangerous if it implies the return of a concept to an original semantic state. Languages do not preserve meanings as museum objects. Concepts alter their significance through use, translation, institutionalisation, contestation, analogy, borrowing, and philosophical reinterpretation. Masolo's account of African philosophy in search of identity is instructive precisely because it presents African intellectual identity as historically contested and philosophically produced rather than as the simple recovery of an already completed essence (Masolo, 1994). Semantic restitution therefore has a normative rather than archaeological meaning. What is restituted is not an uncontaminated past but the philosophical standing of a concept whose intelligibility may have been narrowed, displaced, mistranslated, or subordinated by inherited categories. The concept is returned to philosophical work, not returned to historical purity. Its indigenous provenance matters because it identifies a linguistic and historical site from which inquiry can begin; it does not confer immunity from criticism or guarantee philosophical truth (Táíwò, 2022; Wiredu, 1996). This distinction also separates semantic restitution from two symmetrical errors. The first is colonial substitution: the assumption that an indigenous concept becomes philosophically intelligible only when rendered equivalent to an established Western category. The second is nativist essentialism: the assumption that an indigenous concept is philosophically authoritative because it is indigenous. Between these lies the methodological possibility of treating linguistic particularity as evidence without treating it as revelation.

The metaphor of restitution also has a further significance. Sarr and Savoy's discussion of the restitution of African cultural heritage concerns the return of cultural objects removed within histories of colonial domination and the reconstruction of relations between Africa and institutions holding such heritage (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). Semantic restitution does not claim that concepts are artefacts owned by communities in the same sense, nor that a linguistic concept can literally be returned to an original historical owner. The analogy is therefore limited and methodological. Material restitution concerns the return of displaced heritage; semantic restitution concerns the restoration of displaced or narrowed conceptual possibilities to active philosophical inquiry. The former concerns objects and institutional relations; the latter concerns intelligibility, interpretation, criticism, and philosophical use.

3.2 *Five Operations of Semantic Restitution*

Semantic restitution can be specified through five connected operations: The first is genealogical retrieval. The philosopher reconstructs the history of the term or conceptual field, distinguishing linguistic usage from later philosophical attributions and attending to the effects of translation and colonial categorisation. The second is semantic mapping. Instead of beginning with the question, which foreign

concept does this word mean? the inquiry reconstructs the network of contrasts, practices, expressions, and inferential relations within which the indigenous expression operates. The third operation is contextual validation. Proposed meanings must be tested against patterns of actual usage and against the contexts in which speakers deploy the relevant expressions. This requirement follows directly from the methodological problem exposed by the Wiredu–Bedu-Addo disagreement: a phrase that appears philosophically suggestive in translation cannot be elevated into a technical category merely because the interpreter requires such a category (Bedu-Addo, 1999). The fourth operation is critical philosophical elaboration. Linguistic evidence is a source of philosophical material, not a substitute for argument. Reconstructed distinctions must therefore be assessed for their epistemological, logical, ethical, or metaphysical implications. The philosopher must distinguish what the linguistic evidence establishes from what philosophical reasoning subsequently infers from it. The fifth operation is contemporary rearticulation. A reconstructed concept must be capable of entering present philosophical discourse without being forced into identity with the imported category that initially occasioned the investigation. This aligns with Wiredu’s account of domestication, according to which African thinkers may creatively appropriate external forms of inquiry rather than merely reproduce them (Wiredu, 1996; Wiredu, 1998). The result is not a lexical replacement but a philosophically defensible articulation of the conceptual relations at issue. The five operations are sequential without being mechanically linear. Later philosophical reflection may expose deficiencies in an earlier reconstruction and therefore require a return to contextual evidence. Likewise, contextual validation may reveal that what initially appeared to be a coherent semantic field was partly produced by translation. Semantic restitution is therefore better understood as a recursive methodological discipline than as a rigid algorithm.

3.3 Semantic Restitution as a Middle-Level Methodology

Semantic restitution is deliberately narrower than decolonial theory as a whole. It does not claim that coloniality explains every contemporary African intellectual phenomenon, nor does it prescribe a general programme for cultural transformation. Its object is more determinate: the reconstruction of a concept whose present intelligibility has been mediated by translation, inherited categories, colonial education, or theoretical substitution. It therefore operates at a middle level between broad accounts of decolonisation and particular interpretations of indigenous concepts. The proposal extends an existing reconstructive current in African philosophy. Serequeberhan’s hermeneutical project situates African philosophical interpretation within historical experience and a critical engagement with inherited categories, rejecting an unmediated recovery of an untouched past (Serequeberhan, 1994). Semantic restitution shares this historical-hermeneutical orientation but renders semantic reconstruction more procedural, specifying a movement from genealogical retrieval through semantic mapping and contextual validation to philosophical rearticulation. Gyekye’s reconstruction of tradition and modernity offers another neighbouring position. His treatment of African cultural experience subjects inherited resources to rational evaluation and their critical adaptation to modern conditions (Gyekye, 1997). Semantic restitution shares this reconstructive impulse but narrows its object from the broader tradition–modernity relation to the semantic reconstruction of specific linguistic resources. The distinction is therefore methodological, concerning object and sequence rather than a rejection of Gyekye’s project.

Chimakonam’s conversationalism provides a pertinent methodological comparison, grounding African and intercultural inquiry in horizontal reciprocity, dialogical equality, and non-hierarchical engagement (Chimakonam, 2017). Semantic restitution shares this intercultural orientation but operates prior to the completed dialogue: it determines what has been recovered, how its semantic relations are structured, whether they withstand linguistic and contextual scrutiny, and what content may legitimately enter philosophical exchange. Thus, while conversationalism foregrounds the dialogical conditions of philosophical encounter and co-creation, semantic restitution concerns the prior reconstruction, clarification, and validation of the conceptual resources that make such dialogue possible. The metaphor of restitution derives analogically from cultural-property restitution. Sarr and Savoy address the historical removal of African heritage and its return into renewed relations of access and use (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). Semantic restitution invokes this analogy only at the level of displacement and renewed access: it seeks to restore displaced or narrowed conceptual resources to active philosophical inquiry after their intelligibility has been reorganised by inherited categories. It does not treat concepts as material artefacts, assert literal return or ownership, but advances a methodological claim concerning intelligibility, use, criticism, and renewed philosophical participation.

Semantic restitution converges with African hermeneutics in historical situatedness, cultural reconstruction in the critical evaluation of inheritance, conversationalism in intercultural engagement, and restitution discourse in the recovery of displaced resources for renewed significance. Its distinctive

contribution, however, lies in formalising a procedural movement from semantic recovery to philosophical rearticulation, secured by contextual validation and anti-essentialist safeguards. Its novelty therefore rests not in interpretation, reconstruction, dialogue, or criticism themselves, but in systematically articulating their methodological relations for reconstructing indigenous conceptual resources.

4. The Akan Concept of Truth: Enacting Semantic Restitution

The Akan discourse of truth offers a particularly revealing test of semantic restitution because it brings linguistic form, translation, contextual usage, and philosophical reconstruction into direct contact. Rather than merely using the Akan case to illustrate a previously formulated theory, this section deliberately enacts the five operations of the method. Genealogical retrieval situates the Akan material historically rather than beginning with an assumed English equivalent. Wiredu's discussion of *nokware* and *nea ete saa*, rendered as "what is so," must therefore be examined through its presentation, translation, and subsequent interpretation rather than treated as transparent access to a fixed Akan concept (Wiredu, 1998). This genealogy includes Wiredu's association of *nokware* with truthfulness or moral sincerity and *nea ete saa* with cognitive correctness, alongside Bedu-Addo's critique of the former's semantic and contextual adequacy (Bedu-Addo, 1999). Retrieval consequently yields not a finished theory of truth but a contested semantic field, preserving the distinction between linguistic evidence, philosophical interpretation, and subsequent criticism. Semantic mapping reconstructs relations among expressions rather than seeking a single lexical equivalent of "truth." Wiredu relates *nokware* to truthfulness and moral sincerity, and *nea ete saa* to the cognitive sense of "what is so," thereby revealing a semantic field involving sincerity, deception, assertion, trustworthiness, correctness, and what is the case (Wiredu, 1998). The methodological question thus shifts from "Which Akan word means truth?" to "What relations organise truth discourse in Akan?" This avoids imposing one-to-one English categories upon Akan and makes the semantic network, rather than lexical substitution, the object of reconstruction. Likewise, the absence of a discrete Akan equivalent of "fact" does not settle whether the truth-fact distinction is conceptually absent; what matters is how the relevant relations are organised. Semantic mapping therefore permits both convergence and divergence without reducing conceptual equivalence to lexical identity or linguistic difference to philosophical difference.

Contextual validation tests the reconstructed semantic map against actual usage, making Bedu-Addo's critique methodologically significant: his emphasis on the moral and contextual dimensions of *nokware* exposes the evidential limits of Wiredu's proposed equivalents (Bedu-Addo, 1999). The point is not to discard Wiredu's analysis, but to constrain interpretation by linguistic and contextual evidence. Thus, "what is so" cannot become a technical theory of truth merely through Western resemblance, nor can the absence of a lexical equivalent for "fact" establish an absence of the corresponding conceptual distinction. Contextual validation therefore guards against both Western taxonomic imposition and the romanticisation of lexical difference as proof of conceptual uniqueness.

The proper conclusion is therefore deliberately modest: Akan does not partition the relevant semantic territory through precisely the same lexical architecture as English. But this linguistic divergence, by itself, does not settle the philosophical question. It establishes the need for further philosophical analysis. Bedu-Addo's criticism thus performs precisely the methodological function that semantic restitution assigns to contextual validation. It prevents an interpreter from moving directly from translation to philosophical system-building. It requires the reconstruction to remain answerable to linguistic practice.

4.4 Critical Philosophical Elaboration

Critical philosophical elaboration asks what philosophical consequences can responsibly be drawn from the validated reconstruction. Wiredu's observation that Akan lacks a separate lexical item corresponding to the English philosophical term "fact" raises an important question for theories of truth, particularly theories in which truth is analysed through some relation between truth-bearers and reality, facts, or states of affairs (Kirkham, 1992). If *nea ete saa* ("what is so") does not reproduce the same lexical separation between truth and fact found in English philosophical discourse, then the English truth/fact pairing cannot automatically be treated as a linguistically universal articulation of the problem. This does not establish that correspondence theory is false. Nor does it establish that Akan cannot formulate a distinction between truth and fact through other linguistic or philosophical means. The philosophical conclusion must therefore remain more restrained: lexical architecture does not settle metaphysical theory.

The Akan case challenges the assumption that any linguistic tradition's conceptual segmentation is philosophically compulsory: distinctions indispensable in one language may represent only one historically contingent organisation of a problem. This makes the reconstructed semantic field philosophically

productive while also bearing upon deflationary theories of truth, which, unlike correspondence theories, resist construing truth as a substantial metaphysical property (Horwich, 1998; Kirkham, 1992). The Akan case does not establish deflationism; rather, it raises a prior comparative question concerning which elements of truth theories pertain to truth itself and which derive from particular linguistic distinctions among truth, fact, proposition, and reality. Linguistic evidence may therefore constrain philosophical theorising without independently determining its conclusions.

4.5 Contemporary Rearticulation

The fifth operation requires the reconstructed semantic field to return to a live philosophical debate. The Akan material can therefore be rearticulated within contemporary debates concerning deflationary, minimalist, and correspondence approaches to truth. Minimalist theories such as Horwich's seek to explain the role of the truth predicate without attributing to truth a substantial metaphysical essence, whereas correspondence theories assign explanatory significance to a relation between truth and reality or facts (Horwich, 1998; Kirkham, 1992). The Akan case does not decide between these theories. Its contribution is instead diagnostic. The absence of a discrete lexical counterpart to "fact," together with the availability of an expression concerning what is so, suggests that the conceptual utility of truth need not depend upon reproducing the English lexical pairing of "truth" and "fact." This creates comparative space for asking whether some formulations of correspondence theory depend partly upon historically particular ways of dividing the conceptual field. At the same time, contextual validation prevents the opposite inference. The fact that Akan does not lexicalise the distinction in precisely the English manner does not establish that Akan speakers cannot distinguish truth from fact, nor that Akan philosophical reflection must conform to a minimalist theory of truth. Linguistic non-equivalence is therefore neither evidence of philosophical deficiency nor proof of theoretical superiority. The intercultural contribution is consequently more precise. The Akan case demonstrates that theories of truth can be subjected to a comparative test concerning the conceptual assumptions embedded in their terminology. It asks whether distinctions treated as philosophically necessary are genuinely necessary, or whether some of them arise from particular linguistic and historical configurations. In this sense, semantic restitution returns the reconstructed Akan semantic field to inquiry: it does not preserve it as an artefact of the past, but places it in productive tension with contemporary philosophy of truth.

Together, the five operations show why semantic restitution is more than a descriptive account of indigenous concepts. Genealogical retrieval prevents the reconstruction from beginning with an ahistorical translation; semantic mapping reconstructs relations rather than isolated equivalents; contextual validation disciplines interpretation through actual usage; philosophical elaboration separates linguistic evidence from philosophical inference; and contemporary rearticulation returns the reconstructed material to a live philosophical problem. The Akan case therefore enacts the method itself: it shows how linguistic difference can become philosophically consequential without being converted into either deficiency or an untouchable mark of authenticity.

5. Avoiding Essentialism Without Abandoning Recovery

Anti-essentialism must govern semantic restitution from its inception, secured by three safeguards. First, it is historically conscious, recognising that present meanings are mediated by translation, borrowing, semantic change, institutional reinterpretation, and philosophical reconstruction. Second, it is internally critical, treating indigenous usage as evidence rather than an infallible arbiter of philosophical truth. Third, it is dialogical, keeping reconstructed concepts open to comparison, criticism, appropriation, revision, and transformation through intercultural exchange (Masolo, 1994; Táíwò, 2022; Wiredu, 1996). These safeguards clarify the relationship between restitution and African agency. Táíwò's objection is not answered merely by acknowledging that colonialism happened; it is answered only if the methodology leaves African thinkers free to decide what inherited materials are worth retaining and what forms of transformation they warrant (Táíwò, 2022). Semantic restitution consequently treats agency as the capacity for reflective selection. The African philosopher may retain a concept, reject it, combine it with another, translate it, modify it, or generate a new conceptual articulation from it. What matters is that no prior demand for cultural purity determines the outcome.

Semantic restitution rejects two symmetrical forms of heteronomy: colonial substitution, which absolutises external categories as measures of intelligibility, and nativist essentialism, which absolutises indigenous categories as measures of authenticity. Both displace philosophical judgment. Against them, the method treats concepts as inheritances whose significance emerges through critical appropriation, consonant with Wiredu's domestication of foreign resources and Táíwò's conception of African intellectuals

as agents of appropriation and innovation rather than custodians of a fixed essence (Táíwò, 2022; Wiredu, 1996). Accordingly, restitution is not semantic purification but reflective reconstruction: it need not expunge foreign influence, but renders the historical and semantic conditions of a concept sufficiently explicit for its contemporary use to become an exercise of critical choice.

6. Philosophical Implications

Semantic restitution shifts attention from isolated lexical equivalents to conceptual relations. An epistemic concept is not exhausted by its dictionary translation because its philosophical significance depends upon its role in practices of assertion, testimony, justification, trust, disagreement, correction, and responsibility. The Akan case illustrates this point. The philosophical question is not merely what word translates “truth,” but how speakers distinguish and evaluate what is said, what is believed, what is so, and what counts as truthful conduct (Bedu-Addo, 1999; Wiredu, 1998). Language thus becomes a site in which epistemic structures may be disclosed rather than a passive container for propositions already formed elsewhere. The Akan analysis also yields a concrete intercultural epistemological consequence. It shows that the philosophical work performed by the concept of truth can be investigated independently of whether a language lexicalises “truth” and “fact” as separate terms. This does not vindicate either deflationism or correspondence by linguistic evidence alone. Rather, it demonstrates that theories of truth should distinguish claims about the function of the truth predicate from claims about the semantic or metaphysical categories presupposed by a particular language. The comparative case therefore enlarges the space in which theories of truth can be tested. It asks philosophers to determine which components of a theory are genuinely features of truth and which depend upon historically particular modes of conceptual segmentation.

Translation, though indispensable to intercultural philosophy, is not semantically innocent: it may disclose functional relations while effacing differences in conceptual segmentation. Wiredu’s translation of the Akan expression as “what is so” illustrates this ambivalence, rendering an Akan conceptual resource philosophically accessible while risking its assimilation to a supposedly equivalent English category (Wiredu, 1998). Semantic restitution therefore subordinates translation to semantic reconstruction, treating it not as a terminus of inquiry but as a provisional heuristic whose adequacy remains philosophically contestable. This prevents intercultural comparison from becoming an imposition of the interpreter’s categories upon the interlocutor’s conceptual resources.

African agency lies neither in rejecting the foreign nor in uncritically inheriting the familiar, but in the reflective capacity to determine what merits retention, revision, appropriation, or rejection (Táíwò, 2022; Wiredu, 1996). Semantic restitution institutionalises this agency methodologically by reconstructing concepts without insulating them from intercultural criticism. It thus occupies a middle ground between universalism as conceptual assimilation and particularism as conceptual isolation: conceptual difference need not entail incommensurability, nor does comparison require identity (Wiredu, 1996). The reconstructed concept therefore enters intercultural philosophy neither as cultural authenticity nor as a defective Western analogue, but as an autonomous philosophical resource whose semantic structure and claims remain open to criticism and capable of transforming shared philosophical problems.

6.4 The Distinctiveness of Semantic Restitution

The preceding analysis also clarifies the answer to Futter’s objection. If conceptual decolonisation can, at a certain level, become indistinguishable from philosophy generally, then semantic restitution cannot claim distinctiveness merely because it involves interpretation, conceptual analysis, criticism, or reconstruction (Futter, 2023). Its distinctiveness is methodological and configurational. First, it begins with genealogical retrieval, thereby requiring the reconstruction of the historical conditions under which a semantic field has become available to philosophical inquiry. Second, it performs semantic mapping, thereby shifting attention from lexical equivalence to relations among concepts, practices, contrasts, and uses. Third, it requires contextual validation, thereby preventing philosophical reconstruction from outrunning actual usage. Fourth, it performs critical philosophical elaboration, thereby preventing linguistic evidence from being mistaken for philosophical argument. Fifth, it requires contemporary rearticulation, thereby ensuring that reconstruction culminates not in archival preservation but in participation in a live philosophical problem. Finally, the method incorporates anti-essentialist safeguards throughout these operations. Indigenous provenance initiates the inquiry but does not determine its conclusion; historical difference is recognised without being converted into philosophical privilege. Semantic restitution is therefore not a claim to have invented interpretation, reconstruction, translation, or intercultural dialogue. Its contribution is to organise these operations into an explicit methodological sequence directed toward a specific philosophical problem: the

recovery and critical re-entry of indigenous conceptual resources whose intelligibility has been mediated by historical asymmetries of translation and conceptual authority.

7. Conclusion

This paper has established conceptual decolonization as a critical negotiation between inherited Western formations and indigenous semantic resources (Futter, 2023; Wiredu, 1996). It has further demonstrated semantic restitution as a methodological means of retrieving, contextualising, interrogating, and rearticulating indigenous concepts without subordinating African agency to authenticity (Táíwò, 2022). The analysis of *nokware* and *nea ete saa* shows that semantic non-equivalence necessitates philosophical reconstruction rather than conceptual deficiency or cultural absolutism (Bedu-Addo, 1999; Wiredu, 1998). Its engagement with Serequeberhan, Gyekye, Chimakonam, and Sarr and Savoy situates the framework within reconstructive and intercultural philosophy (Chimakonam, 2017; Gyekye, 1997; Sarr & Savoy, 2018; Serequeberhan, 1994). The paper therefore concludes that semantic restitution enables African philosophy to critically inherit, transform, and deploy its conceptual traditions without surrendering their philosophical agency.

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