

By the authors

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*Wisdom for the Soul: Five Millennia  
of Prescriptions for Spiritual Healing*

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*Brother's Keeper: Words of Inspiration  
for African-American Men*

*One Million Strong: A Photographic  
Tribute of the Million Man March*



*The lips of the wise are as the doors of  
a cabinet; no sooner are they opened,  
but the treasures are poured before you.*

*Like unto trees of gold arranged in  
beds of silver, are wise sentences uttered  
in due season.*

~ Khemetic Wisdom ~

*Proverbs are full of poetry and twists. They are made up of words that have been molded for centuries, if not milleniums, until a minimum of words carry an extraordinary potential for meaning.*

*~ Gaston Kaboré ~*

# WISDOM *for the Soul of Black Folk*

*Compiled & Edited by  
Larry Chang*

*Contributing Editor  
Roderick Terry*

*Wisdom is not like money, to be tied up and hidden.*

*~ Akan Wisdom ~*



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*Wisdom for the Soul Of Black Folk*

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To the island and people of Jamaica who gave  
me birth and shaped me; to the memory of  
Nanny, Muriel Meredith, who nurtured me; to  
Ruoji, wherever you are, who weaned me on  
Anansi.



The spider is an iconic symbol of wisdom in many African cultures. Its web, produced from within itself, represents the life-giving nature of the sun and the interconnectedness of all life. In Akan cosmology, Anansi, from the Twi word for spider, is the son of Nyame, the sky god and Asase Ya, the earth goddess. He is credited with creating the sun, moon, stars, night, day and was the first man in whom Nyame breathed life. He originated agriculture, weaving, construction and social organization. As the keeper of stories, Anansi tried to hoard all of the world's wisdom in a calabash. He soon realized the selfishness and futility of this, so he released wisdom to the world.



## GUIDE TO USAGE

NAMES : For the most part, authors are referred to in the text by the names they are most widely known, with birth and/or other names listed in the index.

### ABBREVIATIONS USED:

b.	born
BCE	Before the Common Era
c.	circa (about)
C.	Century
CE	Common Era
d.	died
fl.	flourished
Ibid.	from the same source
ed(s).	editor(s)
tr(s).	translator(s)



*Give your ears, hear the sayings,  
Give your heart to understand them;  
It profits to put them in your heart.  
~ Amenemope ~*





## *Contents*

Guide to Usage	7
Acknowledgments	11
Introduction	13
Table of Subjects	17
Biographical Index	367
About the Authors	381

*Why should I pester you with  
quotations? – to shew you the depth of  
my erudition, and strut like the fabled  
bird in his borrowed plumage.  
~ Ignatius Sancho ~*





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*In Two Volumes. To Which Are Prefixed,*  
*Memoirs of His Life, Vols.1 & 2*  
© University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

*It is through other people's wisdom that we learn  
wisdom; a single person's understanding does not  
amount to anything.*  
~ Yoruba Wisdom ~



*Nyansa*, as wisdom, is an Akan word,  
made up of *nya* and *nsa* meaning  
“that which is obtained and is never exhausted.”

~ N. K. Dzobo ~

“Knowledge and Truth: Ewe and Akan Conceptions,”  
*Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*,  
Kwasi Wiredu & Kwame Gyekye, eds.



## *Introduction*

Another book of quotations? Indeed there are numerous excellent extant anthologies of quotations, but these tend to be very broad, with a bias toward canonical and well-known authors; those works which document the contributions of Black authors have tended to focus on African-Americans, considerable as their output is. Undeniable recognition of this prevalence is reflected in the title of the present volume which pays homage to W. E. B. Du Bois' classic work and in the preponderance of entries from American sources. Nevertheless, effort has been made to cast a wider net to capture under-represented and unfamiliar voices.

Much of African wisdom, originating in pre-literate cultures and colonial societies, has been conveyed orally. As the role and numbers of griots diminish, so have the surviving oralatures. Alex Haley notes, "When a griot dies, it is as if a library has burned to the ground." What remains is represented, exceptionally by the Ife Oracle commentaries, in secret society rituals, and in proverbs, tribal songs and folk tales, but this too is threatened by the inundation of digitized global culture. Replacement generations have increasingly become consumers of cultural products packaged elsewhere rather than participate as creators and agents in and of their own traditions. The irony is that now that we have the technological capability to record, preserve and transmit performative legacies, we lose them instead to the onslaught of canned entertainment with its emphasis on materialistic bling and egoistic gratification.

Despite this, with the flowering of national and ethnic consciousness, there is a post-colonial movement to speak the marvellous complexity and diversity of the Black experience into the record. In addition to creating and augmenting national literatures, to the extent even of writing in threatened and obscure languages to preserve and promote their continuity, to syncretizing and synthesizing the ethnic and ancestral with the contemporary, Black authors have inserted themselves into the mainstream of metropolitan literary output, reflecting back to those societies their multicultural actualities. This assertion has been succinctly captured in the title, *The Empire Writes Back*, an anthology of post-colonial criticism. Indigenes, immigrants and their descendants, beneficiaries of tertiary education, are producing books, many of which have broken out of the confines of niche markets to become international bestsellers.

## 14 INTRODUCTION

Khemitic texts preserved in papyri and stelae are the earliest literature to have survived, followed by the writings of North African Romans and Ethiopian philosophers and clerics, and the lately recovered Timbuktu manuscripts from their repositories in the desert sands of Mali. The Transatlantic slave experience gave rise to the slave narratives and abolitionist literature from both sides of the Atlantic, which expressions characterized the struggle of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Post-Emancipation under colonial rule and white domination, Black poetry and prose emerged, adhering to prevailing standards, evidenced typically in the work of Phillis Wheatley and the sonnets of Claude McKay. With the Civil Rights and Black Power movements would come iconoclastic expressions of protest and identity. Today, global Black literature covers the entire gamut of genres from philosophy and science fiction to erotica and graphic novels. The proliferation of media affords us unprecedented access to the minds of diverse thinkers of African origin and descent through biographies, memoirs and interviews.

Fortunately for our purpose, there is a sizeable body of literature by Black authors who speak to universal values and eternal verities. This anthology of their work focuses on the inner life, on personal development and self-actualization. The quotations have been selected to inspire, enlighten and encourage; they have been arranged by category and by author in chronological order. The resulting timeline of thought in itself is useful and instructive as it demonstrates very clearly the evolution of consciousness evident in the contemporary thinking on particular subjects. One or more quotations in each classification will be sure to strike a responsive chord in the reader.

In the stress of modern life, we seek solutions, or at least some insight from whatever quarter, that may relate to or throw light on the challenges we may be facing. We can take some small comfort in realizing that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. We have a legacy of recorded thought spanning some five millennia in various world cultures that addresses every conceivable condition that has faced the individual. Somebody somewhere has probably been there, done that already. We can refer to what they have thought and said of the experience, and we can learn from them.

These selections indicate, not only that Black folk should be listening to themselves, but that the rest of humanity would do well to give an ear.

Jak Manduora mi no chuuz non.



*Unfortunately, no one has yet found a way to make most scholarly texts interesting enough to entice laymen to read them – unless they are assigned by teachers with the power to inflict punishment. So it is left to the historical novelist and other nonacademic writers to popularize the complex issues of academia.  
~ Playthell Benjamin ~*



*A wise man who knows his proverbs can reconcile difficulties.*  
~ Nigerian Wisdom ~