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## **Rethinking the Study of African Indigenous Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## Rethinking the Study of African Indigenous Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### **The 29<sup>th</sup> Surjit Singh Lecture, 2020 Graduate Theological Union**

The GTU has been a leading center for ecumenical and interreligious studies, a spirit reflected in the annual Singh Lecture. It is named after Surjit Singh, who was professor emeritus of Christian philosophy at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and a member of the GTU's core faculty. The 2020 lecture was delivered by Dr. Jacob Olupona, who is a noted scholar of indigenous African religions and has served on the Faculty of Divinity and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University since 2006. In his book *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, he examines the modern urban mixing of ritual, royalty, gender, class, and power, and how the structure, content, and meaning of religious beliefs and practices permeate daily life. His other books include *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*, co-edited with Terry Rey, and *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yoruba Festivals*, which has become a model for ethnographic research among Yoruba-speaking communities. Dr. Olupona received the 2018 Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion.

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It is a well-known fact that religion continues to play a central and vital role in the lives of African people. The much-cited dictum by the doyen of African Religious Studies, the recently deceased Prof. John Mbiti, that

Africans are “notoriously ‘I prefer to say deeply’ religious” still holds true. While officially, statistics suggest that African Christians and Muslims constitute about 80% of the total population, and African indigenous religion constitutes about 20%, these statistics do not reflect the truth of the African situation. The African religious worldview is primarily indigenous, although Islam and Christianity continuously respond to its viability and strength through their transitive approaches, their theologies, and their knowledge systems. Similarly, indigenous religion, worldviews, and rituals such as rites of passage and other religious performances, are permeated by other religions, culture, and society in general as well. Initially, Christian missionaries and propagators of Islam assumed that indigenous religion would eventually fizzle out, while Islam and Christianity would dominate the African religious scene. Scholarship has since proved, however, that the tenacity of indigenous religion is evident in all spheres of African life.

As scholars of the comparative study of religions in Africa, we must begin to rethink the study of African religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to avoid the continuous mis-assessment of the resilience of indigenous traditions. Indigenous religions are definitive of the African identity, as African religion and cultures provide the language, the ethos, the knowledge, and the ontology that enables the proper formation of African personhood, the communal identity, and values that constitute kernels of African ethnic assemblages. Such that, despite all of Christianity and Islam’s claims to dominance and their propagandist machinery in demonizing indigenous religion, African Religion still provides significant meaning to African existence in many ways.

For example, imagine an African village or city devoid of its primordial ritual practices, festivals, ceremonies, or sacred precincts. Imagine they have all been destroyed and removed and replaced by Islam and Christianity. Such places will ultimately lose not only their identity but also lose their essence and beingness. Today’s lecture will attempt to refocus the centrality of indigenous religion not only in defining African cosmology and African worldview but also in defining the African personality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## What is African Religion? The Big Question

The range of African indigenous beliefs and practices has been referred to as African traditional religions, in an effort to encompass the breadth and depth of the religious traditions on the continent.<sup>1</sup> The diversity of the traditions themselves is tremendous, making it next to impossible for all of them to be captured in a single presentation. For starters, even the word “religion” used in reference to these traditions is in itself problematic for many Africans, because it suggests that religion is separate from other aspects of one’s culture, society and environment. But for many Africans, religion can never be separated from all these. It is a way of life, and it can never be separated from the public sphere. It informs everything in traditional African society, including politics, art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics and death.

Despite its diversity and the contiguity of seemingly unrelated aspects as visible in different religious traditions, there are several common features of African traditional religious beliefs and practices that can be discussed as denotive of African indigenous religions. These shared features suggest similar origins and can lead to African religions to be treated as a single religious tradition—just as Christianity and Islam would. Despite the plethora of denominations and sects, African religions continue to be viewed as single entities.<sup>2</sup> While Africans are a deeply spiritual people, their (our) religions are perhaps the least understood facet of African life. Many foreigners who come to Africa become fascinated by ancestral spirits and spirits in general, as if the mystique of African religions are the only aspect of African spirituality that can hold scholarly interest.<sup>3</sup>

There are three central aspects of African religious worldview that can be generalized for the purposes of this presentation, namely:

1. There is a supreme being who created the universe and every living and non-living thing to be found within the universe.  
Often, the Supreme God is assisted by smaller deities who

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose Moyo, “Religion in Africa,” in *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, ed. Donald Gordon and April Gordon (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Vincent B. Khapoya. *The African Experience: An Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994).



perform different functions in relation to the one supreme being.

2. Spirit beings occupy the next tier in the cosmology and constitute a pantheon of deities. Mbiti divides spirit beings into two types, nature and human spirits. Each has a life force but no concrete physical form. Nature spirits are associated with objects seen in nature such as mountains, the sun, or trees, or natural forces such as wind and rain. Objects and forces in the sky and earth are both represented by spirits. Human spirits are represented by people who have died, usually ancestors, in the recent or distant past.
3. The world of the ancestors occupies a large in African cosmology. The ancestors, which continue to play a role in community affairs after a person has died. As spirits, they are more powerful than living humans, and they act as intermediaries between God and those still living.<sup>4</sup>

A fourth attribute of African traditional religion I would add to these is that Africans live their faith rather than compartmentalize it into something to be practiced on certain days or in a certain place. Catholic moral theologian Laurenti Magesa argues that unlike the clothes one wears and can take off at will, for Africans religion is the skin in which they live. John Mbiti also captures this unique aspect in the following passage:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; . . . Although many African languages do not have word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. Through modern change these traditional religions cannot remain intact, but they are by no means extinct. In times of crisis they often come to the surface, or people revert to them in secret.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990), 2.

The most difficult task I face in characterizing African indigenous spiritual traditions is accounting for its diversity and complexity. One approach will be to outline, in a systematic way, the essential features of these traditions without paying much attention to whether or not the traditions fit into the pattern of religions already mapped out by western theologians and historians, who use western religious traditions as the standard for construction of what religions should look like in other parts of the world. African religions should be studied on their own terms, examined through their own frames rather than framed in a Judeo-Christian structure and spectacle. Unlike the Christocentric structure that guided earlier perspectives, and approaches to the study of African religions, contemporary study of African religious traditions should endeavor to provide not only awareness of socio-cultural contexts but also narrate the historical dimensions of these traditions.

## **Myths and Cosmologies**

The narratives about the creation of the universe (cosmogony) and the nature and structure of the world (cosmology) provide useful entry to our understanding of African religious life and worldview. These narratives come to us in the form of what in scholarly language is often called myths. Unlike in popular usage, myths are sacred stories believed to be true by those who hold on to them. Myths reveal critical events and episodes of profound and transcendent significance to the African people who espouse them. Myths deal with events involving centrally superhuman entities, gods, spirits, ancestors etc. One must resist the structuralist temptation which views myth as static, unchanging and simply productions of a peoples' imagination about the cosmic order.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, myths are oral narratives passed from one generation to the other and represented and reinterpreted by each generation who make the events revealed in the myths relevant and meaningful to their present situation.

As in myths the world over, African mythology has multiple often contradictory versions of the same event. African cosmogonic narratives

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<sup>6</sup> Luc De Heusch, "What Shall We Do with the Drunken King?" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 45, no. 4 (1975): 364; Matthew Schoffeleers, "Religion and Power," *Social Compass* 32, no. 1 (1985): 5-13.

posit the creation of a universe and the birth of a people and their indigenous religions. Myths are also stories about how the world was put into place by a divine power, usually a Supreme god, but in collaboration with other lesser supernatural beings or deities, who act on his behalf or aid in the creative process. Unlike the Christian community, recited stories of creation are not performed by a single God, who ordered by fiat the creation of the universe by mere spoken words. Some biblical cosmological narratives have parallels in African cosmogony, for example, when the Supreme being summons the hosts of heaven and declares to them “Come let us make man in our own image” this same script appears in the creation of the Yoruba world when Olodumare designates to the Orisa (deities), the job of the creating the universe.

Secondly, in spite of the heuristic value of V.Y. Mudimbe’s distinction between myth and history in Africa and by extension the cohesion of oral and written narratives, the notion that myth is non-rational and unscientific, while the latter is critical and rational is false.<sup>7</sup> For one thing, a sizeable number of African myths deal with events considered to have actually happened as narrated by the people themselves or as reformulated into symbolic expressions of historical events. Symbolic and mythic narratives may exist side by side with narratives of legends in history that bear similar characteristics with motifs and events of creation or coming to birth. On the other hand, we now know from research and archival sources, that by their very nature, sources and records of missionaries, colonial administrators, and indigenous elites, which were preserved by colonial administrations, were equally susceptible to distortion and perforation having been written from the angle of an invented modernity that the colonizer considered superior to the worldviews of local peoples.

Thirdly, the mechanisms and techniques of creation vary from story to story and from one tradition to another. While scholars have often argued that African indigenous accounts of creation were *ex nihilo* as the

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<sup>7</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 250.

biblical account of creation is often portrayed,<sup>8</sup> African cosmological narratives generally indicate that there is never one pattern governing how creation happens. All over the continent, cosmological myths are defined as a complicated process whether the universe evolves from preexisting objects or from God's mere thought or speech. Whichever way it happens, African cosmological narratives are similarly complex, un-systematized and multivariate—and are the bedrock for indigenous value systems. As such, even within a single ethnic group or clan, there are often highly contested and even opposing stories or viewpoints when it comes to creation accounts, thus allowing for flexibility and hermeneutic creativity. The absence of centralized and unified cosmologies indicates the multifaceted nature of African religious life and world views. African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every aspect of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday and the mundane.

Another important feature of African spirituality is that it is not a closed theological system. It doesn't have a fixed creed, like many forms of Christianity or Islam. Traditionally, Africans have different ideas on what role the ancestors play in the lives of their living descendants. Religious worldviews often unique to distinct ethnic groups, reflect people's identities and lie at the heart of how they relate to one another, to other people, and to the world at large.<sup>9</sup> Thus these religions act as a sort of code by which African people exist and integrate religious expression into their daily lives.

Although it is difficult to generalize about African traditional cosmology and worldviews, a common denominator among them is a three-tiered model in which the human world exists sandwiched between the sky and the earth (including the underworld)—a schema that is not unique to Africa but found in many of the world's religious systems as well. A porous border exists between the human realm and the sky, which belongs to the gods. Similarly, through although ancestors' dwell inside the

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<sup>8</sup> John Middleton, *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, Vol. 377 (Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

earth, their activities also interject human life, which is why they are referred to as the living dead.<sup>10</sup> African cosmologies, therefore, portray the universe as a fluid, active and impressionable space, with agents from each realm bearing the capabilities of travelling from one realm to another at will. In this way, the visible and invisible are in tandem, leading practitioners to speak about all objects whether animate or inanimate as potentially sacred on some level.

The notion of ritual as central to the performance of religion. Ceremonies of naming, rites of passage, death and other calendrical rites embody, enact and reinforce the sacred values communicated in myths. They often dictate when the community honors a particular divinity or observes particular taboos. Divinities and ancestors have personalized annual festivals during which devotees and adepts offer sacrificial animals, libations and favored foods to propitiate them. Ritual enables supernatural beings to bless individuals and the community with sustenance, prosperity and fecundity.<sup>11</sup> Rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies, are rituals marking personal transitions recognized and celebrated by the community. Each ceremony denotes passage from one social status to another and is an opportunity to celebrate the initiates on their journey.

As a lived religion, African tradition deploys, through its ritual processes, particularly rites of passage, calendrical rituals and divinatory practices, tangible material and non-material phenomena not only to regulate life events and occurrences, in order to ensure communal wellbeing. African religion supplies knowledge to live by and also a transfer of tradition, worldview, ethical orientation (principles of what is right or wrong), an ontology—a way of life etc. Hence the aforementioned rituals have become not only the open sesame to the understanding of African tradition and religions but also to the visible manifestations and essence of African religious traditions.

As we might know, initiations for adolescent African girls cause great consternation amongst Westerners, because they often involve rites like female circumcision or other bodied practices. Female circumcision is a hotly contested practice condemned by many global organizations and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 56.

lumped together under the category of “female genital mutilation,” few have much clarity or knowledge on what is actually involved. Most importantly, the rite itself should not be condemned together with circumcision or FGM. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the practice, it is important to note that not all female initiations involve circumcision, and that the rituals associated with initiation are crucial to ensuring that an individual’s social position is affirmed by both family and community. For this reason, the communal aspects of such rituals have, due to their salience, been retained in many parts of Africa, e.g. the Maasai in Kenya and in Somali culture both in Djibouti and Somalia, while doing away with the circumcision practice altogether due to the health risks associated with it.

African traditional religions are structured very differently from Western religions in that there is relatively little formal structure. African religions do not rely on a single individual to be a religious leader, but rather depend on an entire community to make the religion work. Priests, priestesses, and diviners etc. are the authorities who perform religious ceremonies, but the hierarchical structure is often very loose. Depending on the kind of religious activity being performed, different religious authorities can be leaders for specific events. The cosmological structure, however, is much more defined and precise.

African religions are therefore a praxis and this is where the focus should mostly be. They provide the orientation for the human life journey by defining the rites of passage from life to death and why this is important. Every life stage is important in African religions, every stage of transition from birth and naming, betrothal/marriage, elder hood and eventually death. Each transition has a function in the society, there are rituals which celebrate the passage of time and mark time as it passes for the people orienting them to the seasonal changes, e.g. new yam festival and celebration of the old season and beginning of a new one. Also significant is the centrality of ancestral tradition and ancestorhood as being crucial to the African lifeworld and to African religious beingness. Next to the gods and the Supreme Gods are the ancestors. This is a necessary understanding of death and the hereafter that includes the ancestors.

Death is a transition from the current life to the afterlife and marks a continuity in life for those living and those to come.

The contestation between tradition and modernity is therefore always a going concern when it comes to African religion. The tension between the past and the present affects the way African religions are not only construed but the way they are perceived and represented in scholarly discourse. This is perhaps why African religion, an embodiment of vibrant and vivid expression, constantly reinvents itself to relate to contemporary issues and find solutions to challenging problems faced by its devotees and practitioners.

### **Sacred Kingship and Civil Religion**

The insight that propelled my earlier scholarship was that the ideology and rituals of Yoruba sacred kingship are what define Yoruba civil religion and indeed the center of Yoruba identity. Sociologist Robert Bellah understands civil religion as the sacred principle and central ethic that unites a people, without which societies cannot function. Civil religion incorporates common myths, history, values, and symbols that relate to a society's sense of collective identity. In the case of the Yoruba kings and their people, sacred kingship formed a sacred canopy that sheltered the followers of each of the three major traditions mentioned above, forging bonds of community identity amongst followers of the different faith traditions. Later in my academic life, I explored theoretical issues at the national level, showing how Nigerian civil religion, an invisible faith, provided a template for assessing how we fared at nation building, allowing the symbols of Nigerian nationhood to take on religious significance for the Nigerian public above and beyond any particular cultural communities of faith.

I do not want to be misunderstood here. Advocating for civil religion in a religiously pluralistic society does not require the erasure of conventional religious traditions. Rather, institutional religion continues to grow in relevance and in the national imagination, whether its invocations are part of conversations concerning nation building, Maitatsine and Boko Haram violence, the secularism debate, the Shar'ia debate, the question of Islamic banking, or the role of the Organization of Islamic Conference. With

this in mind, this lecture aims to explore the place of religion in Nigeria's contemporary affairs. By religion, I refer not only to institutional religion and the beliefs and practices as they relate to the sacred and transcendent, but also to practices not always defined as religious, including the rites of passage offered by our various youth brigades, and also the values of communalism and national sacrifice. Religion also encompasses the human, cultural dimensions within faith traditions, such as how human agency shapes, influences, and complicates religious control. Thus, I examine religion not only as a sacred phenomenon, but also as a cultural and human reality, all the while remembering the importance of integrating the sociopolitical dimensions of religiosity into our examination of the crisis of the Nigerian state.

### **Divination and the Importance of Divinatory Practices**

In the context of comparative study of religions there is nothing different in the function of African religions as compared to other religious traditions. If something is to be found in Islam, Christianity and even Buddhism, chances are it also appears in other traditions including African religions. As I have argued in the past, indigenous religion has always played a pivotal role in the African public sphere. In indigenous religion, communities are governed according to the dictates of the gods, particularly through the divination system such as Fa (Benin) and Ifa (Southwest Nigeria) which encompass the political, social, economic conditions of life. In my research into Ifa narratives, I once showed how in the Ifa worldview, a traditional banking system was created and made possible when Aje, a Yoruba goddess of wealth, visited Orunmila, god of divination, to seek tips on how to keep robbers from stealing her spurious wealth, which the added task of securing was becoming quite burdensome to her. It was through this encounter that the Yoruba system of banking money in traditional pots kept underground in farms and forests began. What is fascinating about this Odu (Ifa Text) is that it supports a key and cardinal principle of Ifa tradition, that we seek counsel first, before we perform divination (*Imoram la nda ki a to da Ifa*) The diviner, therefore, is also a counselor, psychologist, medicine man and woman and the spiritual guardian of villages and towns.



The Ifa Divination system, which produced 256 chapters of oral narratives, constitutes an encyclopedic compendium of knowledge that provides answers to nearly every meaningful human question in the Yoruba and Fon universe. Ifa defines Yoruba humanity, providing responses to critical issues of its communities. Ironically, the pivotal source of knowledge and spiritual edifice—that the modern-day Yoruba reject as constituting paganism—is the cornerstone of global Orisa traditions in Brazil, Cuba, and the Caribbean.

Divination enables us to recognize how indigenous traditions have a foundation upon which knowledge and knowledge production is developed. We must be careful not to give the impression that African religious lives are compartmentalized into what is often called the triple heritage (Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion). In the lived experiences of the people there has been so much borrowing and interchange particularly in those places that have a history of peaceful coexistence among diverse religious traditions as it is among the Yoruba. However, African indigenous religion has not only succeeded in domesticating Islam and Christianity, in many instances, it has absorbed into its cosmology and narratives accounts and practices from the two other traditions. A classic example is how the Ifa divination text of the Yoruba provide deep commentary on the practice of Islam by the Yoruba people such as the Hajj tradition. In one particular *odu* of Ifa, Ifa informs us and correctly so that the most cardinal event of the Hajj is the climbing of Mt. Arafat [oke-Arafa] In response to this verse, Ifa defines its own pilgrimage tradition in the rituals, of the climbing of Oke Itase (Ifa Hill) the home of Ifa when the Araba of Ifa in quiet solitude leads the devotee to the top of the sacred temple of Ifa. Like in the Muslim pilgrimage, it is a solemn journey to the hilltop. An Ifa song warn those embarking on the pilgrimage to be pure and those who possess witchcraft not to embark on the pilgrimage.

## **Gender and the Role of Women**

Another false impression often given about African religions is that women do not play a central and leadership role in the performance of African religious traditions. This is far from the truth. Gender dynamics are

important in African indigenous religions and in cultural systems, so much so that women goddesses and women-invented rituals are commonplace. Women constitute a sizeable number of the devotees of these traditions just as it is in Islam and Christianity. One of the more fascinating conversations that has emerged in the debate about African indigenous traditions is the central role of women as bearers and transmitters of it, but also the negotiation of gender dynamics. Unlike in most patriarchal traditions where women's participation and roles are curtailed, African religions' attitude towards gender inclusion is unique. Whereas in certain contexts and communities' we have documented in very many instances the central role of goddesses as founders of traditions, builders of kingdoms and saviors and defenders of cities and civilizations e.g. Moremi in Yoruba land, Nzinga in Angola, Osun in West Africa.

Women are revered in African traditions as essential to the cosmic balance of the world. As the late African historian Cheikh Anta Diop argued, matriarchy was embedded in the African way of life. In as much as androcentric authority was more prominent within social structures and systems and patriarchy is more pronounced in the social order, women are considered the corner stone of the African family system. Apart from a few instances in West Africa, where women actually ruled as kings, the designation "queen" was not often used in isolation from the position itself (which was defined in male terms). The African mother is a vibrant life force central in African religious understandings of the interrelatedness between the human and the Divine as she embodies the production of life and the sustaining of life given to her. Thus, many practitioners of African religion, particularly in the shrines of goddesses are women, emphasizing the parity with which African religion treats gender and gender related issues. African American women are turning more and more to goddess religions and Orisa practices as they find African religion offering them greater religious autonomy than other Western religions.

### **African Religion in the Creation of African Diasporic Religions**

Another crucial aspect to consider in the comparative study of African religions, is the reality of the transfer of these religions across the Atlantic through the Middle Passage and transnational migration and cultural

exchange. The formation of African Diasporic Religions in the crucible of forced and voluntary migrations of Africans from the continent from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the intermingling of African Religions with Christianity and local cultures of the Transatlantic to form novel religious expressions. Religions of the African diaspora are of particular note and importance to the comparative study of African religions due to their resilience and characteristic formations leading to their performance and expression. Religions such as Candomblé, Vodun, Santeria and the Caribbean and Orisa tradition themselves historically came about from African transactions with the new world, where they encountered the old Euro-Christian worldview and through their mixing a new kind of religion emerged forming the basis for what we have come to know as African Diaspora religion.

Why is this important to our understanding of African indigenous religions? Because it enables us to theorize questions of syncretism, hybridization and more importantly raises the issue of why African religion is flowering and spreading in the Americas especially in the United States while it is declining in Africa—a phenomenon that we need to understand. It proves to us that on the continent while the early modernizers assumed that African Religion was part of the problem of the anti-modernity project and that the uprooting of African Indigenous Religion will auger well for the modern African state. What we are seeing in the new world, is that the stone which the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone and central pillar, e.g. Santeria was central to Cuban state making, and in Brazil only recently has Pentecostalism become responsible for the violence against Candomble devotees.

African scholars in the United States are increasingly paying more attention to African images in African American culture and religion.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars, especially literary critics now scout African American novels such as Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's works, for glimpses of African traditions, and others such as Henry Louis Gates appropriate images of Yoruba deity of Esu in his own work. Significant as these studies are, there

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<sup>12</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Book that Brought the Shock of Self-Revelation to Middle-Class Blacks in America* (New York: Free Press, 1957). I was inspired by Andrea Lee's review of Lawrence Otis, *Our kind of People Inside America: Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), published in the New York Times Book Review, Feb 2, 1999.

seems to be no systematic exploration of African in African American traditions, what the sociology E. Franklin Frazier, in a parody describes as the “content and significance” of African traditions in African American culture.<sup>13</sup> My essay on Tony Morrison is an attempt to begin a fresh conversation on this topic.

## **African Religion and Inter-Religious Engagement and Research**

Understanding the contours of traditions as they are today, consists of picturing both what they are and what they can be in the backdrop of what they once were. Religious contexts are shaped and determined by the identity of these religions. Representation matters, and as scholars we have a responsibility to advocate for religions in their contexts. In the primordial era as, various forms of ethnic indigenous religions spread across the African Continent, providing cohesive foundations of nations, peoples, and religious worldviews. Based on sacred narratives, these traditions espoused their unique worldviews. They defined cosmology, ritual practices, socio-political framework, and ethical standards, as well as social and personal identity. Yet scholarship in the history of religion indicates that indigenous African religions were never considered a substantive part of world religious tradition because they failed to fulfill certain criteria defined by the axial age “civilization.” Privileged European scholars denied the agency of African religions. Such scholars singled out—and thereby controlled—African identity. For example, James George Frazer (1854-1941) and Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) classified indigenous religious practices of “natives” not as universally religious or generative of religious cultures, but as forms of “primitive” religion or magic arising from the “lower” of three stages of human progress. These stages characterized European perceptions of human evolution. Such scholars stereotyped African religion—and Africans themselves—as primitive social forms, part of a lower social order.

Responding to this erasure of African indigenous religion as a productive and generative practice, scholars rallied in opposition. Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Wande Abimbola, Benjamin Ray, Gabriel Seiloane, Laura

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Grillo, Alonysius Lugira, Kofi Asare Opoku, Ikenga Metuh, and Charles Long, and others attempted to imbue African traditions with the vitality, status, and identity now recognized. African religions command their own cultural ingenuity, integral logic, and authoritative force. This corrective scholarship and critical intervention helped to redefine African worldview and spirituality and, as such, showed how African religion is pivotal to the individuals and communal existence of the people. Just as Muslim traders and sojourners introduced new world religions to North and West Africa, Western traders and missionaries introduced new world religions to the Continent. Indigenous traditions, however, did not capitulate to these forms, but rather creatively domesticated the new faiths, absorbing new rituals and tenets into their own belief systems and responding to the exogenous modernity in its wake. Time permits me to cite only one example.

When I was in Israel a few years back, I stayed in a modest bread and breakfast inn near the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I ran into a co-resident, a famous Swiss author. When he heard that I came from Nigeria, he wanted to display his knowledge of Ocha tradition as a devotee of Oxhosi, God of Thunder in Afro-Brazilian heritage. When I told him I am a twin (Ibeji) in Yoruba tradition—and in principle a sacred being myself—he almost fell on the floor to pay homage! My credential as a Harvard Professor made little impression on him. Our parting last week was hard for him! A proper ongoing study of Ifa in West Africa would enable us to understand how one group—the Yoruba of West Africa—encounters transcendence and the sacred, in practicing their tradition in ways radically different from Western constructions of religion.

Through a profound process of orality, Ifa as an interpretive tradition espouses an epistemology, metaphysics, morality, and a set of ethical principles and political ideology. These elements are worth exploring and espousing. The first encounters are fascinating. The Africans engaged Western enlightenment and religious traditions in serious dialogue and conversation, and responded by creating and interpreting their own modernity. While some Christian mission historians such as J.D.Y. Peel argue correctly, for example, that the Yoruba had their own enlightenment, “Olaju,” it is always presented in the context of Christian conversion, very

much tied to the escalating Christian Missionary Movement. But Ifa Divination predates Western modernity. Ifa's religious thought system, though friendlier to Islam than to Christianity, not only predates Islam but also engages Islam in serious conversation.

One of my favorite Ifa narratives acknowledges to Yoruba Muslims that climbing Mount Arafat was the most significant act of the Hajj. The stoning of the Devil in the Ka'ba in Mecca was a disguise for rejecting the local Esu, the Yoruba God of Fate and Messenger of the Gods. Esu was represented as a stone mound in the front yard of ancient Yoruba compounds. Ifa rejects the religious extremism of certain forms of radical Islam making life unbearable in today's world. Many centuries ago, Ifa must have envisaged the possibility of Boko Haram's Islamic extremist movement ravaging Nigeria today. On the other hand, the Yoruba people encountered Europeans in dialogue rather than monologue. Similar to other West African communities, the Yoruba did not reject Western modernity but challenged its claim to ontological and epistemological superiority. During the era of Western religious and cultural encounters in Yorubaland, some children were named Oguntoyibo signifying, "Ogun (God of War and Iron) is as powerful as the European god." Some children received names such as Ifatoyinbo, "Ifa is as powerful as the white man's god." Such names and concepts illustrate the force and creative resistance of indigenous thought and its ability to engage Western modernity in rigorous debate. It is incorrect to assume that conversion to Islam or to Christianity dealt a deathblow to indigenous traditions. Despite conversion to Islam or to Christianity, Africans continue to accommodate an indigenous worldview occupying vital space in the African consciousness.

What is the implication of indigenous hermeneutics for scholars today? I suggest that at conceptual and theoretical levels, we begin to take this interpretive approach seriously. What, for example, is the notion of history and the sacred in Akan thought? And why should our work in critical theory not begin from basic hermeneutics before we invoke Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, or Jürgen Habermas as platforms for interpreting our own worldview and society? European theorists are important, and we need to know and understand them to engage in serious global dialogue of culture, but it doesn't mean that we should

discard our traditions as non-interpretive traditions limited only for ethnographic illustrations. They certainly represent interpretive traditions, and when carefully studied, they form a basis for serious theoretical imports.

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