

# Rethinking African Religious Traditions in Local and Global Context

Repensando tradições religiosas africanas no contexto local e global

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## ABSTRACT

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## RESUMO

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I gladly welcome the invitation to give this address in this very important conference, and thanks to the Pan-African Strategic and Policy Research Group as well as the Postgraduate Program in Religious Sciences for inviting me to Juiz de Fora and Brazil. Surprisingly, this is my first time in Brazil even though my research has also focused on African religions in the Americas. I have resisted all attempts to join the list of distinguished scholars and younger students who have been studying Afro-Brazilian religions, most notably some eminent “Brazilians” of my acquaintance such as Pierre Fatunbi Verger, who made Ile-Ife and Nigeria their intellectual home. One of the reasons for my reluctance is that in my second coming to America in the 1990s, I noticed that the enthusiasm for the study of African religions on the continent was

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diminishing. Therefore, it was important for me to continue to focus on the study of religion in Africa, and especially the Yoruba religion of Southwestern Nigeria.

Ultimately, a primary question we should ask about the relevance and significance of diaspora studies is “of which people and of which place?” Any study of African religions in the Americas presupposes that first and foremost we have prior knowledge of African religious traditions, its people and its society. While we do not have to be specialists in it, we at least should know what it means in the African context.<sup>i</sup>

My point of departure for this lecture is to talk about the Florida International University, Miami Conference on the globalization of Yoruba religious traditions, held in 1995. It provided an opportunity to bring together scholars and practitioners of this globalizing tradition from across Africa and the African diaspora to discuss whether or not orisha (Orisa) traditions constituted a world religion. It was a response to the dominant paradigm in the academic study of religion in the West that constructs and categorizes certain traditions as so-called “world religions” and others as being of lesser importance. The conference, which resulted in the edited volume *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture* by Terry Rey and myself, made a significant impact on the scholarship then in 1990s. Although many people still think of “African religions” as ethnic or local, the ways in which a great number of African traditions have moved beyond their original points of origin, taken root in multiple places, and can now be found flourishing all around the globe, the Yoruba experience has disproved this view. Consequently, we should be leaders in articulating how the globalization of African traditions should change the way we think about and engage with them.

I would like to propose a scholarly agenda for your consideration that will enable us to move forward, not only in rethinking how we study these traditions but also how we practice

these traditions. First, I propose that we intensify the focus on archaeological and archival research to enable us to dig more deeply into the past, but also to harvest the results as tools that can shed more light on what previous practitioners experienced. What are the kinds of materials and embodied practices that will help us to understand the lived nature of African and African diaspora traditions? Because these traditions are lived traditions, they can enable us to chart the historical trajectories and development of African existence across time and space both on the continent and in the black Atlantic world. It is a truism that most studies of African religions lack deep historical perspectives. Right now there are very few works that I know of that we can rightly refer to as a history of African religions in Africa and the diaspora. Part of the problem we have is that societies and nations that do not take seriously their traditions in constructing their worldview will continue to be enslaved by Western ideas.

Second, I would like to argue for a renewed focus on indigenous hermeneutics. My premise here is that these traditions have their own interpretative frameworks. African cosmologies and cosmogonies provide the bedrock for interpreting the current realities of African existence. It is these tools that should be used to frame and understand African problems and develop adequate solutions for them.

Thirdly, we need to re-ask the basic question “what is religion?”. This line of research will allow us to interrogate the nature of religion vis-à-vis African and African diasporic traditions. Consequently, we could not only avoid irrelevant debates—of which we have too many—but be able to recognize the contribution that the field of African religions can make to issues of method and theory in the broader study of religion. For example, African religious and cultural sensitivities recognize pluralism and abhor single-minded, uncompromising worldviews and

doctrinal exclusivism. This can provide a significant theoretical framework for understanding its difference from Western constructs of religion as my work on civil religion demonstrates. The result is that it may rescue us from the pejorative interpretations and meaning that scholars have extended to the concepts of syncretism, popular religion, and quaint traditionalism that have bogged down the study of many diaspora traditions such as Vodun or Candomblé. The study of indigenous traditions in Africa can come to our rescue by demonstrating how pluralism was part and parcel of the very fabric of religion. In the West, often projects around pluralism assume that this exists outside the framework of the Abrahamic faiths with which they are familiar. In an African and African diasporic context, this is rather strange as pluralism is inherently built into the very idea of religion. Syncretism implies that specific religions are “pure” and that borrowing from other traditions is contamination and ‘sin,’ which is a largely Western perspective. Not only does the Yoruba idea of the existence of 201 gods point to the possibility of always including an extra deity, Yoruba religious artistic displays of Orisha with clearly Christian and Muslim characteristics also point to a similar issue. As one famous Osun song puts it “Mejeeji l’a o ma se/Ko baaje o/Ka s’aluwala/Ka w’odo omọ/ Mejeeji l’a o maa se” or *We shall practice both together/ it is not wrong, to perform Muslim ablutions/ and to go to the Osun River to ask for children/ We shall do both.*

I am also concerned with the dynamic relationship between the local and the global both in Africa and by extension in the New World. I would argue for the importance of indigenous hermeneutics. We need new theories and ideas with which to engage the traditions both in the Americas and in Africa. We need to move away from the Western constructs that have defined not only the nature of the religions and also its interpretation, but are indeed are more concerned with advancing a different kind of scholarship that may prove to be irrelevant to the

lives of the people whose traditions are studied. Only scholars who take African epistemology, ontology, and ways of understanding the world seriously will be able to engage in this type of endeavor. I see no reason why we cannot deploy African and African derived systems of knowledge to critique a very troubled Western world and civilization. Recent political, economic, and even environmental events have demonstrated that this world is not well, and new solutions are desperately needed. I think Brazil in particular offers unique opportunities in this regard as it is home to a great number of African derived traditions that exist within a broader, Western society. A question we should ask ourselves in addition to simply accurately understanding and representing African and African diaspora traditions is, “what new and productive perspectives on the *Western* world do these traditions have to offer?”

To this effect, we cannot study African religious traditions in isolation. Religion itself is not hermetically sealed, but we must understand how it is implicated in various aspects of life. We must come to understand how it is useful and important in the lives of those who practice it in order to gain a full, accurate, and impactful perspective on what African religious traditions are and how they function. I would like to propose that the study of African religion both on the continent and in diaspora should go beyond the phenomenological interpretation of religion, religion qua religion framework, but also address existential concerns prominent in the lives of devotees themselves. These would include health matters, politics and governance (race and ethnicity), morality and ethics (responses to violence and aggression), economics and development (poverty, prosperity, etc.), sexuality and gender, etc. This is because religion cuts through all aspects of African life, which means multiple, connected interactions with globalization and modernity. While time will not allow me to go into detail about each of these points, permit me to at least say a few words on healing and medicine, poverty, and race.

Perhaps it is in the area of health and healing that we have made the most interesting observations. Pierre Verger's many works on the importance of medicinal and herbal plant material and the practice of medicine in Yoruba religion has convinced scholars of the knowledge of indigenous medicine that Africans have virtually lost today.<sup>ii</sup> While the Chinese have developed what they consider to be "alternative" forms of medicine to that of the West, ours continues to suffer because of the uncompromising attitude of Christianity, Islam, and the so-called African modernizers who took over from the colonial state. A recent PhD thesis by one of my graduate students began as a study of doctors in Atlantic slave ships in the 17th and 18th centuries but turned out to be a fascinating work on the role of traditional healers, particularly nurses, during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Not only did she provide evidence for the significant status of West African traditional nurses because of their role in preserving life, she also suggested how much the Western doctors depended on these women's knowledge and their practice even for their healthcare.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere I have reflected on the importance of religion with respect to issues of poverty in Africa and the African diaspora. In my opinion, religion must be taken seriously not only in respect to the way religious communities can help to alleviate poverty now (such as many faith based organizations or specific communities such as the Mourides in Senegal), but also in historical perspective. Although economic inequality certainly did exist in pre-colonial Africa, the shift in theological perspectives in regards to communal ownership or stewardship to individual/private property during the modern era had tremendous implications on the way various forms of wealth were understood and distributed. Furthermore, the current capitalist

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<sup>2</sup> Roberts, Carolyn *To Heal and to Harm: Medicine, Knowledge and Power in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (2017)

perspectives on nature and its exploitation for personal gain often not only violate traditional taboos but are disturbingly close to notions of witchcraft and sorcery in traditional cosmologies. My argument is that taking a religious approach to the issue of poverty allows us to understand its history in interesting new ways, and can also present new methods for understanding, defining, and also addressing it in ways that are not only effective, but congruent with the lives of Africans and their descendants in diaspora.

It is now clear that racism continues to be the most disturbing aspect of black life in the Americas. The iron curtain of color prejudice has prevented and barred black people from all over the world from reaching their full potential with respect to contributions on a global scale. One is not judged by the quality of one's intellect, but by the color of one's skin. This has not gone away, and the current situation in the United States and Brazil demonstrates the persistence of this racism. It is a situation that is reinforced by Western ideology and supported by scriptural passages as we witnessed in South African apartheid. Several scholars have examined it under the rubric of Afrikaner civil religion and liberation theology. The type of denial of racial issues we can often find in Brazil prevents the development of a critical dialogue that would help in understanding the nature of racism and serve in addressing the problems. From my own understanding of Yoruba society, it is the nature of slavery not only as a kind of extension of the Western and Arab slave trade, that dehumanizes the agency of black people, but a different perspective on the matter. While the Yoruba conception of slavery is not without its own complications, those who were slaves could easily become indistinguishable members of the family. In fact, there is a Yoruba saying *ta ba keru, inu eru a ba je* "if we begin to count our slaves, the slaves will become unhappy," this is because people who probably had no idea that they were descended from slaves will realize that their position in the family structure is not quite

what they had thought. In this sense, a slave can relatively easily acquire full membership within the group and become an equal member of the society, but if one is black in the West, having a passport or citizenship does not ensure the full protections of the law or benefits of citizenship. Here again, African traditions can help us look critically at where some of the problems in the West lie, how they are constructed, what can be done to address them, and point to concrete alternative realities. Also, if religion had the power to perpetuate some of most virulent aspects of racism in the past, then surely we must take religion seriously in addressing and doing our best to reverse them.

My concern is to argue that given that we have accomplished a significant and extensive study of African religion and the diaspora in a global context, this is a good opportunity for us to take stock of what we have done with the intention of reexamining both our methodological and theoretical assumptions and provide a roadmap for moving forward. From my own study of African religions, both on the continent and the diaspora, I can argue that the field has been engaged in both phenomenological and ethnographic study in multidisciplinary perspectives that encompass not only scholars of religion but also those in the humanities and social sciences. We have also been engaged in the study as it relates to both the diaspora, including the new African immigrant communities of Europe and the United States of America and the African homeland. We have looked at the transformation of the essential nature of Yoruba, Fon, and Kongo traditions in the new world, to mention just a few. We have examined how these African religious traditions travel outside the continent and how in reverse they travel back to Africa in the context of religious tourism and the renewal of indigenous traditions in the religious homeland. This is a type of religious circulation, which has become part and parcel of the practice and field of study itself. Most scholars are focused on specific manifestations of these traditions such as



the orixás in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, etc. Many anthropological lines of inquiry have emerged and debates continue about whether or not devotees of African deities deliberately absorbed aspects of the Catholic tradition or if this was due to forces outside of their power. The theory of syncretism continues to loom large in the conversation.

Lastly, Africans should deal with the issue of value systems. What is the relationship between ethics and the practical application of value i.e. morality? In terms of moral value systems, how can we transform moral values from these traditions into lived values (i.e. instead of only invoking them, how can we actualize them into practice). It is only in this way that Africans can begin to have congress on matters that are crucial to their own survival and development.<sup>3</sup> Rather than viewing these moral codes as an abstract system, they should engage African notions of good and evil with Western understandings of the same. How can these African forms be translated into praxis?

Given that we have accomplished a great deal in these fields, we should continue to ask ourselves, “what is the purpose of studying these traditions?” What do we hope to achieve from it? Is it the study of religion qua religion or is there more to it? All over the world, religion today has become very central not only to culture and society, but in how communities govern themselves. African traditions should not be limited to the reciting of old paradigms. Another question I want to raise, is whether or not African and Diaspora traditions have any major role to play in the global conversation on the nature of religion itself. One can for example reference Islam and how the interactions between Islam and politics has broadened the conversation about questions such as “what is religion?”, “what is secularism?”, “can religious people also profess forms of modernity that are different from the West?” etcetera. We must not see African

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<sup>3</sup> African scholars have theorized ethical values e.g. *Ujamaa*, *Ubuntu*, *Omoluwabi* and others.

religious traditions as merely local phenomena, but as global traditions that have relevance and importance to the wider world and this should factor heavily into our conversations and scholarly approaches. After having developed our field to a great extent, we should seriously consider what we as scholars can do to influence various academic disciplines by raising larger theoretical and methodological questions that will prompt new ways of thinking in the academy and world at large.

While I think we have important insights to offer other disciplines, the more recent globalization of African and African diaspora traditions, the way they interact with each other, and engage the broader world, should also lead us to think about new ways of framing our own research and study of them. Most often, scholars think of themselves as Africanists or scholars of diaspora, but the close connections between these traditions—particularly across the Atlantic—should make us reconsider this way of training students and framing our work. The Yoruba case is well known, but the Vodun of West Africa are anchored on both sides of the Atlantic, and their devotees are very much in communication with each other, people and their religious goods and ideas have been exchanged for quite some time now, and it would be difficult to have a comprehensive understanding of one without the other. The same could be said of Kongolese religion and other diaspora traditions in places like Haiti or Cuba. Some scholars have made note of this important fact in terms of the lives of practitioners, but scholarship has not yet caught up. The diaspora has a massive impact on traditions in the original homeland, and we must learn to view and study them in the same way devotees engage in these communities

In addition, this stresses another fascinating and unique aspect of African and African diaspora traditions; they have multiple centers. It is well known that Salvador is often referred to as the “Black Mecca” because of its central role in Candomblé and African diaspora traditions

more generally, but I think the time has come for us to move beyond the simplistic paradigm of homeland and diaspora. For example, while Ginen (or West/West Central Africa) is understood as the ancestral home/afterlife, practitioners of Haitian Vodun in its own diaspora (in the US or Canada for example) often view trips to Haiti as a return to a sacred center in much the way earlier members of the Atlantic diaspora returned to West Africa to be in closer contact with the traditions they had left behind. Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian practitioners can be found all over Europe and North America, and while they are often eager to return to Africa, trips and spiritual lineages attached to particular places in Brazil are of crucial importance to their religious life. My argument is that this ritual and religious field is so fascinatingly complex and intricate, that we should broaden our perspective and see how this could open up new productive areas of scholarly inquiry and observation.

I would like to draw our attention to a truly critical issue matter in African and African diaspora traditions, which is still relatively recent in their longer history: conversion. While Western churches are finding it difficult to maintain a steady membership, African and African diasporic traditions seem to be gaining ground, even as traditions in the African homeland are often under attack as they often are in diaspora as well. Conversion is a concept largely foreign to most African derived traditions, and the racial, social, political and economic dimensions of these new demographic shifts demand scholarly attention. By this I do not merely mean that we should pay attention to the way that many white Americans are getting initiated into Haitian Vodou and may have an easier time practicing it more openly than their black, Haitian counterparts, although I believe this to be a very important issue. Thinking in more global terms, what are the implications for these religious traditions when practitioners and specialists in the various centers and homelands are in a more difficult economic situation? How does this change

if many of the new converts are white? How does the unequal access to travel and visas affect these international religious communities, particularly if the traditions may or may not be recognized as “religions” in their own right? Or another question that I would love a young scholar to tackle, how language proficiency or lack thereof affects the practice of African derived traditions as they globalize?

It is unthinkable that the study of Arabic would not be an issue of central importance because the number of non-Arab Muslims in the world, but by that same logic, should the study of Haitian Kreyol, Yoruba, Fon, Kikongo, Akan, and many other languages not also be taken up and receive outside support as the study of sacred languages? These issues get even more complicated if we chose to also add Portuguese, Spanish, Jamaican Patois among other languages to the equation. In short, the rapid demographic shifts in African and African diasporic traditions raise a large number of fascinating issues that make the field complex and dynamic in ways that most other fields of religious studies simply cannot match. It is our responsibility to capitalize on these new developments to demonstrate the importance and vitality of these traditions in contemporary global society and ensure the type of recognition and status that they deserve.

Finally, I am very much aware that for many nation-states such as Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and so on, African Traditional Religious rituals and dance have registered in the national psyche and the popular culture of these nations as veritable black heritage. While this is a welcome idea, and is worth celebrating, I must also caution that beyond the dance, the singing and the performances there are also important and significant pointers to black lives, identities, history and sensibilities that for better or worse constitute the very fabric of their existence. Beyond this, their invocation and their performances should also be liberative. Liberation from centuries of oppression, of abuse and of racial discrimination. In this lecture, I hope I have captured for you,

my listeners, an overview of the state of African and African diasporic religious studies in our contemporary moment. I have outlined both the gains and the losses that have occurred as a result of our scholarship. Beyond that, I have also highlighted the urgent concerns, which I hope will spur our scholarship to begin to address not just religious studies for its own sake, but for the socioeconomic spiritual benefits of the millions of practitioners, whose traditions we study.

In closing, I would again like to thank the conference organizers, Professors Jimmy Cabral, Raimundo Barreto Jr., and Afe Adogame for the opportunity to open these proceedings. I also thank you all for your kind attention and consideration of these points. It is truly a pleasure to be around enthusiastic scholars working in such a vibrant and critically important field. We, and most importantly the traditions we study, have so much to offer a world that badly needs their wisdom, and I look forward to learning from all of your work over the next few days.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> My book, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014) was written with this in mind. I am hoping that a translation into French, Portuguese and Spanish will be done soon

<sup>ii</sup> Verger, Pierre *Awon Ewe Osanyin: Yoruba Medicinal Leaves* Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife (1967).