



## REPORT OF THE 1<sup>ST</sup> GLOBAL AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS SYMPOSIUM -

GAIRs - SYMPOSIUM,

OBAFEMI AWOLOWO UNIVERSITY, ILE-IFE, OSUN STATE,  
NIGERIA

(AUG 8<sup>TH</sup>-13<sup>TH</sup> 2016).

### BACKGROUND:

Indigenous African Religions are fundamental to Africans, having a positive cultural identity. Indigenous African Religions collectively face crises of existential proportions, and with the crises arises a fundamental challenge to the humanity of Africans globally. Many aspects of indigenous African religions have become extinct, succumbing to centuries of concerted external and internal pressures to undermine them. Iconoclastic and epistemicide posturings have been the most effective ideological tools used throughout Africa to dispossess Africans of their religious heritage, indigenous knowledge systems, scientific and technological heritage, cultural identity and value systems. At stake is the preservation of the indigenous religions of Africa and the cultures they encapsulate, thereby making an Afrocentric connection to the natural world in the most sustainable way. To be complacent in the face of these endangerment and orchestrated demonization is to actively encourage a potential disaster awaiting global African Religions.

### OBJECTIVES

Objectives of the Symposium include:

- Appraising the term 'indigenous' in light of the theory and history of world religions
- To explore various approaches to the study of African Indigenous Religions, with an emphasis on Africa and its Diaspora.
- To look at the methodological challenges of studying religions that were originally, based on oral textual traditions. Some of them became known as 'religions of the book', because through history their traditions have been transformed into sacred scriptures.



- To examine African Indigenous Religions and see how they can be codified from the largely oral traditions into written sacred texts to be used in the practice, teaching, research on AIRs.

### **KEYNOTE and LEAD SPEAKERS.**

The Keynote Speaker, Professor John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji's [Carnegie/CODESRIA Visiting Professor of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Nigeria and University of the West Indies, Jamaica] address was titled "**Religion, Leadership and Society - a critical perspective in Yoruba indigenous social engineering**".

Professor Afe Adogame [Princeton Theological Seminary, USA] presented a Lead Paper on "**The globalization of indigenous African religious traditions and spiritualities**".

Professor Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe, [University of Georgia, USA] presented the second Lead paper on "**Contextualizing Candomble and Catholicism: Rituals of Venerations of Divinity and Saints**". He argued that these African Diaspora Religions were formulated through syncretic dynamics, combining aspects of principally Yoruba Indigenous religion and doctrines of Catholicism. Specifically, the syncretic elements are located in the venerations of religious Icons of divinities (Orisas) in Yoruba Indigenous Religion impersonated by Saints in the Catholic Faith. The paper then examined the dynamics of behind the rituals of veneration of divinities called Orixas in Candomble as spiritual strategies of appropriation, transformation and preservation for the purposes of African empowerment and self-identity. In a way, the rituals serve as a strategy of (re)claiming and safeguarding the African doctrines, spirituality, and personhood.

### **OBSERVATIONS**

At the end of an engaging three days of paper presentations and contributions from several participants, the following observations were made:

- Several aspects of the African Indigenous Religion have been lost owing to a multiplicity of reasons. There are arguments as to whether there is one monolithic African Indigenous Religion with the same unwritten Foundational Doctrines or Religions with separate Doctrines. This conference worked on the assumption that there are sufficient common traits to speak of an "African Indigenous Religion", while not denying the differences which exist between the religious concepts, practices and values of different



regions in Africa. It is a challenge acknowledged, to identify the common features in view of this diversity.

- The study of rituals of African Indigenous Religion is essential. In these rituals, much of what AIR is, is encoded. They are a body of “scripture” in their own right, which require documentation and knowledgeable explication and interpretation. It is acknowledged that the knowledge of rituals is restricted in many African traditional societies to those initiated. This poses a dilemma which must be handled responsibly. Steps towards a written documentation of the secret rites, of the details of their performance and of their meaning should be taken in a responsible way. In view of the rapidly disappearing knowledge of those who are initiated and who can initiate, this should be done in communication with the initiated communities and with their leaders.
- Most Africans, with their Diaspora, being converted into the two Abrahamic Religions of the Middle East, are not being initiated and find most practices of AIRs primitive. They distrust the secrecy and mysteries behind its practices but in the process, neglecting and abandoning their cultural heritage. Here, the spread, knowledge and understanding of the meanings and an awareness of their sophistication could lead to a renewed appraisal of their religious and cultural value.
- Most of these traditions of AIRs are being passed down from generation to generation with uniform beliefs, practices and interpretations by specialists acknowledged and entitled by their unique ritual communities. The course of training of those candidates who have been found capable follow codified courses and practices. Their coherence and consistency is guarded, preserved and developed by the community of graduated and acknowledged specialists. There is some room of different interpretations, while the essential common knowledge of ritual, practices, world views and beliefs is maintained and supervised. It is advised that qualified teachers and guardians and their institutions must be contacted for the study of AIR.
- In contrast, Christianity and Islam have much more codified and structured theologies, liturgies and doctrines deriving from the Bible and Koran respectively.
- Till date, there is no Centre dedicated to the study and research into African Indigenous Theologies and Spiritualities with its Aesthetics evidenced in Music, Dance, Dress and Hairdos, as well as Governance, Social Engineering and Ethos of Conflict Awareness, Prevention, Management and Resolution mechanisms.
- However, over a century of mostly field research on AIR exists. This literature in several languages should be collected in a new bibliography of African Indigenous Religion, to assist students and researchers in the field of AIR. Existing bibliographies which covers the field of AIR should be updated. The presence of academic institutions



dedicated to the study and research into AIR in the diaspora is acknowledged and contact with these institutions will be sought. A network of scholars working on AIR in different fields and countries will be developed.

- Some of the ritual forms and cosmological, epistemological, philosophical and anthropological thought of AIR have been adopted in syncretistic forms of Christianity of the type of “African Instituted Churches”. These should be identified and recognized in view of the AIR elements in them. It is acknowledged that essential elements of AIR have been preserved and are kept alive in this way.
- Dialogue with those AIC Churches who have adopted and preserved these elements of AIR should be sought in view of the aim of furthering respect and recognition of the AIR heritage.,

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawn from the observations above, the following recommendations were made:

1. To declare a Decade of Action (2018-2027) for Global African History and Culture – for the promotion and teaching of all aspects of African history, Philosophy, Indigenous knowledge Systems and Culture in educational curricula from Primary to University levels. South Africa has become a model for African Countries.
2. To establish a Biennial Symposium to provide a platform for rigorous discussion of African Indigenous Religions, Spiritualities, Theologies, Documentation and Practice both in Africa and in the Diaspora.
3. To urgently explore and collaborate with hosting Institutions in Global Africa for Institutes/Centres for the Study and Research on African Indigenous Theologies, Spiritualities, Music, Dance, Aesthetics before the middle of 2017. University of Buea in Cameroon has accepted in principle to host the African Centre while the Symposium and Festival of Global Africa Indigenous Sacred Music is scheduled for Yaounde, Cameroon in December, 2017.
4. Such Institutes/Centres will conduct and engage in collaborative research between AIRs scholars and practitioners towards codifying AIRs beliefs, practices, knowledge systems in digital form, etc.
5. To develop methods, tools and resources, to strengthen the capacities for building knowledge, trust and solidarity amongst Global African communities, especially women, youths, researchers and practitioners, for the sustainability of African Indigenous Religions.



6. To network with and encourage Governments and Tourist Companies to build partnerships with host communities through research and tourism for the protection, management, preservation and promotion of African Indigenous Religions.
7. To sustain plans and programmes with Volunteer Coordinators for the Inaugural Symposium and Festival of AIR Spiritual Music, Dance, Dress and Hairdos (SYMPOFEST) in Dec, 2017 scheduled for Yaoundé, Cameroon, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIR Symposium scheduled for Lisbon, Portugal 2018.
8. To realise the above recommendations, African Governments, Academics Institutions, Scholars, AIR Practitioners, CSOs and other stakeholders are called upon to contribute Expertise, Knowledge, Finance with Material Resources and share experiences to achieve these set objectives.

## CONCLUSIONS

The historic Symposium, which brought together Presenters and Participants from USA, Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, agreed that the initiation of the Symposium has appropriately created an Interdisciplinary (History, Archaeology, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Sociology and African and Modern Languages and Linguistics) Global African Platform for Academics, Researchers, Post-Graduate Students, Students, AIR Clerics and Adherents for continuous discussion and action in filling the gaps for enhancing the position of AIRs on world stage.

The Presentations are to be peer-reviewed and selected papers published.

The Symposium was agreed to be successful by the Participants.

Participants who were interested were taken on a tour of AIR Monuments and Shrines in Ile-Ife and Osogbo.

The Participants expressed their appreciation to the Local Organising Committee, especially Prof. David Ogungbile, Head of Dept. of Religious Studies at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and West African Rep of the African Association for the Study of Religions, Dr. Oladosu of the same Department, Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola, the Executive Governor of the State of Osun, Nigeria, Prof. John Ayotunde Bewaji of the University of West Indies, Mona Campus, Kingston, Jamaica, Prof. Afe Adogame of the Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, and the Sec-Gen of the International Association for the Study of History of Religion (IAHR) and Prof. Ibigbolade Aderibigbe of the African Studies Institute of the University of Georgia, Athens, USA and the Members, Friends and Staff of the PanAfrican Strategic and Policy



Research Group (PANAFSTRAG) for initiating and co-organizing the Symposium with Obafemi Awolowo University ,Ile-ife, Nigeria.

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