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# From John S. Mbiti to Jacob K. Olupona: A Literary Journey in Review

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## Introduction

There is no shortage of public debate, policymaking activity, and engagement with scholarship related to religion, race, and rights – either on the continent of Africa or in the African diaspora. As a scholar-educator, I have taken advantage of countless opportunities to reflect upon the aforementioned topics, and this essay contains some reflections that are directly related to the following:



1. My teaching and research in 2010, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* and the year in which I worked as a Fulbright scholar in Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria;
2. My 2012 participation in the Global Leadership Summit in Bloemfontein, South Africa;
3. My teaching and learning throughout the 2014-2015 academic year, when, after 23 years as a faculty member at Cleveland State University, I announced my decision to pursue additional professional opportunities outside of Cleveland, Ohio; and
4. My relocation to the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area on the eve of the September 2016 opening of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Regennia N. Williams (second from right) with (left to right) Joel Oke, Biodun Adediron and Yisa Yusef, faculty and administrators at Nigeria's Obafemi Awolowo University, 2010. (Photo courtesy Regennia N. Williams)

What follows is a discussion of the key themes explored in a variety of secondary sources, and the relationship of these scholarly works to larger debates about religion, race, and recent struggles for human and civil rights, primarily in Nigeria and South Africa—two of the most populous countries and largest economies on the African continent. To my mind, the articles by the contributors to this special Mbiti issue are valuable additions to an already rich body of scholarly literature.

## Literature Review

In his classic study, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1970), John S. Mbiti declared that African religions and African history were inseparable, suggesting further that:

Since people are so intimately bound up with their religious life and outlook, their history constitutes the history of their religion. This is an area of study which calls for interdisciplinary cooperation between historians, anthropologists, and theologians.<sup>2</sup>

In subsequent works, including his *Introduction to African Religion* (1975), Mbiti also stressed the importance of African religions in shaping Diasporic cultures, especially in the Americas. Here he observed:

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<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann: London; Doubleday, New York 1970), 1.

The African heritage spread westwards across the Atlantic Ocean to South America, the West Indies, and North America. This happened chiefly through African slaves who were sold there. They mixed with their masters and indigenous peoples, the (red) Indians, biologically and culturally, by bearing children and in cultural life. After the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, most of the people of African descent remained there and became an integral part of those countries. Only a few of them returned to Africa. There is, therefore, a lot of African influence in the cultures of the Western Hemisphere, thanks to the rich heritage brought there by African peoples, who did not give it up or lose it altogether.<sup>3</sup>

Yoruba people, including those who trace their ancestry to the regions that comprise present-day Nigeria, have traveled from their traditional African homelands to the Americas for well over a century. They are also among those African peoples who, in Mbiti's words, "did not give up [their rich heritage] or lose it altogether." In one well-known early twentieth-century publication, *The History of the Yorubas: from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (1921), Samuel Johnson discussed the beginning of Yoruba involvement in the history of the trade in African humanity and shared a related account of the actions of King Aole of Oyo. According to a traditional narrative included in Johnson's book, the king helped launch the "transatlantic diffusion" of both Yoruba people and their culture:

He stepped into the palace quadrangle with face stern and resolute, carrying in his hands an earthenware dish and three arrows. He shot one to the North, one to the South, and one to the West uttering those ever-memorable imprecations, "My curse be on ye for your disloyalty and disobedience, so let your children disobey you. If you send them on an errand, let them never return to bring you word again. To all the points I shot my arrows will ye be carried as slaves. My curse will carry you to the sea and beyond the seas, slaves will rule over you, and you their masters will become slaves."

With this he raised and dashed the earthenware dish on the ground smashing it into pieces, saying "Igba la isọ a ki isọ awo, bẹhẹni ki ọrọ mi o sẹ to! to!" (A broken calabash can be mended but not a broken dish; so let my words be—irrevocable!)<sup>4</sup>

Johnson's research further suggests: "By the 1840s, former imperial subjects had fled southward in large numbers, and slave traders had captured tens of thousands of refugees, many of whom reached Cuba and Brazil." This Trans-Atlantic diffusion of Yoruba people and culture continued, long after the abolition of the slave trade, as did scholarly efforts to analyze the complexities of religion in African contexts. This is clearly evident in E. Bolaji Idowu's *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (1973).<sup>5</sup>

In *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (1996), Idowu, a Yoruba man, moves beyond the general discussion of "African religion" found in the Mbiti studies to talk specifically about the traditional

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<sup>3</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Heinemann: Oxford, Ibadan, Nigeria, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1975), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Obadiah Johnson (editor), Samuel Johnson (author), *The History of the Yorubas: from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Memphis, Tennessee: General Books, 2010, 1921), 192.

<sup>5</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (SCM Press Ltd., 1973).

beliefs of his people. A minister in the Methodist Church in Nigeria, Idowu approached his work from a theological viewpoint, endeavoring, “as much as possible, to let the Yoruba themselves tell us what they know and believe, as they are so well able to do, through their myths, in the recitations of their philosophy, with their songs and sayings, and by their liturgies.”<sup>6</sup>

*Olodumare* was first published in 1962, and the 1996 edition is a “revised and enlarged” version of the original work. Here the author cautions readers of the English language text about the challenges associated with describing the culture of one people using the language of another. Nevertheless, he makes every effort to retain in translation the meanings that Yoruba speakers associate with their abundant oral traditions.

In *A Living Tradition: Studies in Yoruba Civilization* (2003), Louis J. Munoz, a professor of Political Science and French Studies at Nigeria’s University of Ibadan, shared his perspective on the legacy of the Yoruba diffusion in the last of his 11 chapters for this book, “The Odyssey of Tradition: The Yoruba in the New World.” The study is based on his ongoing research, which focuses on manifestations of Yoruba religion and culture in Cuba. Munoz also stresses the importance of language and other factors for those interested in African-derived traditions:

It is fascinating to see how African cultures, beliefs and languages are still alive in the geographic and social context of the Americas. It is therefore possible to use data from Africa and America to answer the many questions concerning historical events, political and social institutions, beliefs, and customs.<sup>7</sup>

What Munoz found to be true of African culture in Cuba, others have observed in different parts of the Americas, since, for some Africans, their Trans-Atlantic journeys began in Nigeria and ended in Brazil or the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau and the State Department, for example, approximately one million Nigerians have migrated to the United States since the late 1960s, and they now live in almost every state.<sup>8</sup> More research is needed, however, to shed additional light on the development of Yoruba communities in the USA.

In 1990, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (Lagos) published *Oral Tradition in Africa and the Diaspora: Theory and Practice* for the Nigerian Association for Oral History and Tradition. According to the editor, the book “is a compilation of papers presented at the International Workshop on Oral Tradition and Oral History: Theory and Practice held at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in 1987.”<sup>9</sup> The workshop and the resulting publication were part of a larger effort to realize two objectives:

First, to bring about an exchange of ideas and knowledge between scholars of different disciplines and many countries. Second, to produce an awareness among Nigerian and [other] African scholars, governments, and public institutions about the practical needs,

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<sup>6</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Revised and Enlarged (Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc, 1996), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Louis J. Munoz, *A Living Tradition: Studies in Yoruba Civilisation* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Bookcraft Ltd, 2003),

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. has a population of over 300 million, and approximately ten percent of that number is foreign born. For more information on the U.S. population profile in 2000, visit <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/profile2000.html>. *2010 Statistical Abstract of the United States*, available online at [www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0052.pdf](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0052.pdf) - 2009-12-10, accessed January 4, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> E.J. Alagoa (editor), *Oral Tradition in Africa and the Diaspora: Theory and Practice* (Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, 1990), ix.

problems, and techniques for the collection, documentation, and preservation of oral data.<sup>10</sup>

The publication includes works by scholars from Nigeria, Mozambique, Kenya, Senegal, and the United States of America. After the workshop participants identified the many challenges associated with using oral data—including the lack of funding to support sustained fieldwork, and other scholars joined their effort to overcome these challenges.

Barry Hallen, for example, faced the challenge of working with translations and oral data head on, and the resulting book, *The Good, The Bad, and The Beautiful: Discourse About Values in Yoruba Culture* (2000), sheds additional light on the close ties between “ordinary language,” African philosophy, and Yoruba religion and spirituality. For Hallen, those who would understand the complexities of Yoruba culture cannot afford to “underrate or to ignore the fact that on the level of everyday experience Yoruba discourse in its own right reveals itself to be conventionally commonsensical, rational, and empirical.”<sup>11</sup> This understanding was not exclusive to the study of religion in African contexts.

A generation after Mbiti and Idowu released their pioneering studies on African history and religious culture, two American scholars, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, authors of *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1989), also insisted that the study of religion continued to illuminate the history and cultures of African-descended peoples in the United States. In their work, a sociological study of Christian congregations in African America, the authors sometimes use a longitudinal approach. Like their African colleagues, they include oral documents among their source materials.<sup>12</sup>

Lincoln and Mamiya were not alone in utilizing this approach in the United States. Milton Sernett's *African American Religious History, A Documentary Witness* also takes a long view of the study of African American religion. In his introduction to the first document in this collection, Sernett stated, “The lineage of African American religion is rooted in the cultural traditions of Africa.”<sup>13</sup> Because this volume contains materials dating from the nineteenth century through the twentieth century—among them, oral testimonies—the collection reminds readers of the varied experiences of religionists in Africa and African America.

In studies of the increasingly diverse 21<sup>st</sup>-century African-based communities in the United States, discussions of American religion and spirituality are sometimes juxtaposed with analyses of class and ethnicity. This is certainly true of *The New Black Gods* (2009) and *African Immigrant Religions in America* (2007).<sup>14</sup>

Of special interest to educators at the post-secondary level are textbooks used in undergraduate survey courses. *The African American Odyssey*, a popular book among those who study and teach African American history, is one example of this type of work. The 2010 edition, complete with President Barack Hussein Obama's picture on the cover, included the following references to Yoruba history and culture in its opening chapter, “Africa”:

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<sup>10</sup> Alagoa, *Oral Tradition*, x.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Hallen, *The Good, The Bad, and The Beautiful: Discourse About Values in Yoruba Culture*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Sernett, Milton C. *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>14</sup> See the introductory essay by Regennia N. Williams (editor), *The Journal of Traditions and Beliefs* 1 (Fall 2009).

To the east of the Akan states (in modern Benin and western Nigeria) lived the people of the Yoruba culture. They gained ascendancy in the area as early as 1000 CE by trading kola nuts and cloth to the peoples of the western Sudan. The artisans of the Yoruba city of Ife gained renown for their fine bronze, brass, and terra-cotta sculptures. Ife was also notable for the prominent role of women in conducting its profitable commerce. During the seventeenth century, the Oyo people, employing a well-trained cavalry, imposed political unity on part of the Yoruba region. They, like the Ashanti, became extensively involved in the slave trade.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the aforementioned political and economic changes in Yorubaland, thousands of Yoruba people were forcibly transported to various parts of the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic Era of the slave trade. The impact of their involuntary migration can be traced through an analysis of Yoruba traditions in Candomble and Sateria, two syncretic religions of the Americas, and their related visual and performing arts. The “Additional Bibliography” section for the “Africa” chapter of *The African American Odyssey* includes Robert Sydney Smith’s *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (1988) and Oyekan Owomoyela’s *Yoruba Trickster Tales* (1977).<sup>16</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, internal migration in the Americas, new immigration from Africa, and religious conversions are facilitating the transformation of the cultural landscape in the American regions of Diasporic Yorubaland.

Already, scholars with the requisite knowledge, interest, and time are beginning to integrate Yoruba religious history into discussions of religion in the Americas, in a manner similar to that employed by Michael A. Gomez, whose published works discuss Christianity and Islam in African and African American history.<sup>17</sup> Among the scholars who are documenting the influence of African cultures in traditional Western settings are the contributors to *Global African Spirituality, Social Capital, and Self-Reliance in Africa*, edited by Tunde Babawale and Akin Alao, and Thomas M. Ilesanmi, author of *The Reflections of a Priest*.<sup>18</sup> Ilesanmi, a priest in the Catholic Church, also made his work available on an 11-track audio compact disc, “Rev. Fr. Prof. T.M. Ilesanmi Presents Folk Tale Songs LAILO Lo le ja,” (2009).<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the audio recordings, monographs, and edited collections by these African and African American male scholars, the work of Sheila Walker, an African American-born anthropologist with family ties to the state of New Jersey, helped pave the way for the growing field of Diasporic Studies in the United States. In an excellent 1988 documentary film, “Bahia: Africa in

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<sup>15</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, et. al., *The African American Odyssey*, (Pearson / Prentice-Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2010), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Sydney Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) and Oyekan Owomoyela, *Yoruba Trickster Tales* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the following works that were authored or edited by Prof. Gomez: Gomez, Michael (editor). *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2006; *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998; and *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas M. Ilesanmi, *The Reflections of a Priest* (Ile-Ife, Nigeria: Obafemi Awolowo University Press Limited, 2009) and Tunde Babawale and Akin Alao (editors), *Global African Spirituality Social Capital and Self-Reliance in Africa* (Lagos, Nigeria: Malthous Press Limited, 2008). While in Ilé-Ifè, I attended a lecture-performance by Professor Ilesanmi, “Yoruba Orature and Literature,” at Obafemi Awolowo University.

<sup>19</sup> This compact disc, “Rev. Fr. Prof. T.M. Ilesanmi Presents Folk Tale Songs LAILO Lo le ja,” is marketed and distributed by Rev. Ilesanmi, St Peter & Paul Church, Lagere, Ile-Ife, Osun State. For more information, write to [thomasilesanmi@yahoo.com](mailto:thomasilesanmi@yahoo.com).

the Americas,” Walker describes Brazil’s Bahia as the capital of Africa in the Americas. In her discussion of the forced migration of enslaved Yoruba people and their religious traditions to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Brazil, she enlightens viewers on the relationship between Yoruba religion and art in such areas as drumming, dancing, and spirit possession. Even in the decorative arts, devotees pay particular attention to the use of color and items such as mirrors.<sup>20</sup> “Bahia” has withstood the test of time. More than 20 years after its release, this seminal work is still in demand among those interested in using documentary films in classrooms and other settings.

Beyond this earlier piece on Bahia, Walker continued to stress the importance of understanding the linkages between African religion and art, through her research and writing on African Christianities, through conferences and related publications, and by working to establish or strengthen university-based African Diasporic Studies Programs, including the one at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, Professor Walker’s work has inspired other research and programming activities in Cleveland, Ohio, including the 2006 conference, “Homegoings, Crossings, and Passings: Life and Death in the African Diaspora.” In a companion book, two of the eleven chapters—most of which are based on revised papers from the conference—focus on the religious cultures of Afro-Brazilians. The *Homegoings* book also includes a special illustrated chapter by Henry Drewal, “Whirling Cloth, Breeze of Blessing: Dancing for the Departed—Ancestral Masquerade Performances Among the Yoruba.”<sup>22</sup> It is not an overstatement to suggest that Walker inspires educators at the post-secondary level to integrate professional training and classroom experiences with travel and research, activities that are priorities for scholars in Cleveland, Ilé-Ifè, and other cities. The Initiative for the Study of Religion and Spirituality in the History of Africa and the Diaspora (RASHAD) is committed to supporting the activities.

### **The University, the Community, and the Global Village**

RASHAD has set a lofty goal for itself: to facilitate an ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue about religion, spirituality, and related cultural expressions --on university campuses and throughout the communities that surround them. Founded in 2007 and, for the first eight years of its existence, based in the Department of History at Cleveland State University, RASHAD continues to work with academic and community partners to enhance the Praying Grounds Oral History Archive and other library collections. Today, the initiative is housed in the RASHAD Center, Inc., a Maryland-based non-profit educational organization. In addition to publishing its annual journal and quarterly newsletter, RASHAD presents lectures, panel discussions, performing arts activities, library exhibitions, and other public programs.<sup>23</sup>

RASHAD’s work is one of the many sources of inspiration for this essay, and some of the ideas expressed in this literature review echo sentiments that have long appeared in RASHAD’s program documents and in publications by Henry John Drewal and Kathy Curnow.<sup>24</sup> Both professors have done extensive research in Yorubaland, and Drewal served as curator for the

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<sup>20</sup> “Bahia: Africa in the Americas,” 58 min. Color 1988 Catalog #37747, is distributed by Brewer Media Associates. For more information, write to mbrew105@aol.com.

<sup>21</sup> Sheila Walker, *African Roots / American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Regennia N. Williams (editor), *Homegoings, Crossings, and Passings: Life and Death in the African Diaspora* (Northridge, CA: New World African Press, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Regennia N. Williams filed the initial Articles of Incorporation for the RASHAD Center on April 12, 2016, in Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

<sup>24</sup> For more information on the RASHAD Initiative, please visit the program website at [www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray/](http://www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray/), where back issue of the *Traditions and Beliefs* are available. Also see Regennia N. Williams (editor), *The Journal of Traditions and Beliefs* 1 (Fall 2009).

African art collection for CSU's Black Studies Program.<sup>25</sup> For years, these teacher-scholars have helped American students understand that, according to some Yoruba oral traditions, the world began at Ilé-Ifè. Their work, however, was not confined to the academy.

In addition to their teaching, both faculty members worked in tandem with the staff and curators at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA). In 1990, for example, Drewal, who currently teaches at the University of Wisconsin, served as co-curator for a major exhibit on Yoruba art for CMA, and the catalog for that exhibit continues to serve as an important reference for students of Yoruba history and culture.<sup>26</sup>

Curnow, who has published on the art of the Kingdom of Benin, the Itsekiri, and the Nupe of Nigeria, has integrated activities related to CMA's African collection and special exhibitions into her courses on African art history. In 2009, for example, Dr. Curnow's students were among the many Clevelanders engaged in the formal study of objects in "Art and Power in the Central African Savanna," a travelling exhibition organized by CMA's Constantine Petridis, the museum's curator of African Art since 2008.<sup>27</sup>

In response to a growing interest in African art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, CMA built a fascinating collection. Today, the collection includes more than twenty works of Yoruba art, among which are *Ibeji* twin figures, *Egungun* masquerades, and a diviner's staff. The permanent collection and special exhibitions are supported by a reference library containing dozens of general works on African art and monographs on Yoruba art, including *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (2001). Published by Indiana University Press, *Osun across the Waters*,

[. . .] continues the exploration of Yoruba religion by documenting Òsun religion. Òsun presents a dynamic example of the resilience and renewed importance of traditional Yoruba images in negotiating spiritual experience, social identity, and political power in contemporary Africa and the African diaspora. The 17 contributors to *Osun across the Waters* delineate the special dimensions of Òsun religion as it appears through multiple disciplines in multiple cultural contexts. Tracing the extent of Òsun traditions takes us across the waters and back again. Òsun traditions continue to grow and change as they flow and return from their sources in Africa and the Americas.<sup>28</sup>

*Osun across the Waters* is also one of the more than 150 Yoruba resources that are available in CSU's Michael Schwartz Library.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For more information on Cleveland State University's African art collection, please contact Michael Williams, Director of the Black Studies Program, at [m.williams@csuohio.edu](mailto:m.williams@csuohio.edu).

<sup>26</sup>For more information on this exhibit, see Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton III with Rowland Abiodun; edited by Allen Wardwell, *Yorùbá: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, (New York: Center for African Art in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1989). Also see, Armand Duchâteau, *Benin: Royal Art of Africa from the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> For more information on Dr. Curnow's teaching and research interests, please see her faculty profile at [http://facultyprofile.csuohio.edu/csufacultyprofile/detail.cfm?FacultyID=K\\_CURNOW](http://facultyprofile.csuohio.edu/csufacultyprofile/detail.cfm?FacultyID=K_CURNOW), Accessed January 4, 2011. For more information on Dr. Drewal, please visit <http://arthistory.wisc.edu/bio/drewalbio.html>, accessed January 4, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford (editors), *Osun across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). For more information on this title, visit: <http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/>.

<sup>29</sup> For more information on these collections, visit Cleveland Public Library at [www.cpl.org](http://www.cpl.org), Cuyahoga County Public Library at [www.cuyahoga.lib.oh.us](http://www.cuyahoga.lib.oh.us), and the OhioLINK Library at [www.ohiolink.edu](http://www.ohiolink.edu).



While on leave from CSU 2010, my Fulbright Fellowship in Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria, provided time for thinking about the African-centered traditions associated with the Yoruba belief system, a global religion with an estimated 40 million practitioners.<sup>30</sup> Ilé-Ifè also offered opportunities for interaction with supportive colleagues at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) and the setting for collecting oral histories and completing other research activities related to the many religious traditions of the Nigerian people, work that had already proved fruitful for Mei Mei Sanford, another Fulbright alumna and the co-editor of *Osun across the Waters*. Publications in this vein have the potential to contribute to the creation of what Professor C.O. Adegbeba described as “a broad historical study of the arts” of Yorubaland.<sup>31</sup>

### **Local History and Global Africa: A Seminar for the New Millennium**

My post-Fulbright teaching and research have benefitted tremendously from the availability of scholarly works in African and African American religion and history. For example, in the spring 2015 section of my newly created seminar, “Local History and Global Africa” (HIS 401), Cleveland State University students were challenged to enhance their understanding of the histories of several African-based communities. Through the analysis of primary and secondary sources that were accessible via the CSU Michael Schwartz Library’s HIS 401 Research Guide—and studying and writing about the assigned readings and other resources related to their self-selected research topics, students gained new insights on the influence of African peoples and cultures the world over.<sup>32</sup> Also worth noting is the fact that many class discussions focused on the American experiences of African-born individuals from the countries listed in Table 1. As the population figures indicate, these numbers are not insignificant.

Africa’s variegated cultural landscape and the continent’s diverse population are the main subjects of *At Home in Africa: Design, Beauty and Pleasing Irregularity in Domestic Settings* (2014).<sup>33</sup> In the book’s sixteen chapters, author Kathy Curnow, again, shares her vast knowledge of the cultures and religious traditions associated with several African ethnicities, most of which are concentrated in West Africa. For their first major assignment for the semester, seminar students joined small groups, acquired expertise on one of the ethnicities discussed in the chapter of their choosing, and delivered an in-class PowerPoint or Prezi report on their chapter’s content. As the seminar’s instructor of record, several of my in-class presentations focused on three of the subject ethnicities for this book—Hausa, Fulani, and Yoruba—all of which are concentrated in Nigeria. Examples from Curnow’s “Yoruba Households” chapter reveal the logic behind the study’s organization and the complex cultures that the subject groups created.

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<sup>30</sup> Estimate provided by the Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE), and cited in a talk at Obafemi Awolowo University by Dr. Ogunyemi (Department of History) in the first quarter of 2010. The 40 million figure includes 30 million in Africa—primarily in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo—and 10 million in the Diaspora.

<sup>31</sup> C.O. Adegbeba, “Yoruba Art and Art History” in ‘Deji Ogusremi and ‘Biodun Adediran (editors), *Culture and Society in Yorubaland* (Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria: Rex Charles Publications, 1998), 158.

<sup>32</sup> Grateful acknowledgment is hereby given to Cleveland State University reference librarian Frances Mentch for creating the HIS 401 Research Guide and leading a spring 2015 special library workshop for HIS 401 students. For more information on the guide, please visit the Michael Schwartz Library’s website at <http://researchguides.csuohio.edu/c.php?g=219373>.

<sup>33</sup> Kathy Curnow, *At Home in Africa: Design, Beauty and Pleasing Irregularity in Domestic Settings* (Cleveland: The Galleries at Cleveland State University, 2014).

Table 1.  
**The New African Diaspora to the United States**  
**Population by Country of Birth: 2008-2012**  
**\*Selected Countries for Topics Discussed in HIS 401, Spring 2015**

COUNTRY	POPULATION
Kenya	95,000
Liberia	71,000
Nigeria	221,000
South Africa	83,000

Source: Christine P. Gambino, Edward N. Trevelyan, and John Thomas Fitzwater, *The Foreign-Born Population from Africa: 2008-2012, American Community Survey Briefs, U.S. Census Bureau, October 2014, page 3.*

Every chapter in *At Home in Africa* begins with a culturally specific aphorism, stated in both an indigenous language and its English translation. In the case of the Yoruba chapter, the opening suggests: “If a woman hasn’t lived in at least two homes, she doesn’t know where she’s better off.”<sup>35</sup> This statement could apply to the evolving roles of Yoruba women over the course of the lifecycle; perhaps as they move from their parents’ homes to the homes that they share with spouses and children, or as they move from the domestic sphere to the daily commercial “homes” of Yorubaland’s market women. The study of race/ethnicity within the larger context of Yoruba history and traditional culture also illuminates the ways in which gender continues to shape religion, especially in and around Nigeria’s Osun state, an area named for a female Yoruba *orisha* deity.<sup>36</sup>

Curnow’s analysis of the intersections of Yoruba art and religion also reminds readers of the following:

[S]ide-by-side during the [20<sup>th</sup>] century were three religious strains: the old religion based on orisha deities, as well as Islam and Christianity. The last two faiths were introduced before the nineteenth century—Christianity by the Portuguese at Ijebu in the fifteenth century, Islam via Hausa and Nupe contacts by at least the late eighteenth century—but it was in the mid-twentieth century that adherence to both of these religions accelerated, gaining both numbers and fervor.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Curnow, *At Home in Africa*, 214.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on Osun, see Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford (editors) *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Additional information on evolving gender roles is available in Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Curnow, *At Home in Africa*, 222.

In Curnow's general description of Yoruba art, one finds the following: "Compartmentalized bursts of patterns within patterns characterize the surface qualities of Yoruba design, which reveals in sharp counterbalances of sculptural forms."<sup>38</sup> Away from the West African region, Curnow also invites readers to consider, among other things, the long view of South Africa's history, encounters between the Zulu people and the British, and its domestic arts, among other things.<sup>39</sup>

Published as a catalog for an exhibition by the same name, *At Home in Africa* is richly illustrated with color and black and white photographs—many of which were licensed through Creative Commons, which meant that interested students could refer to these same sources when searching for images for their final projects.<sup>40</sup> Also worth noting is the book's lengthy bibliography. With approximately 400 entries related to African art and history, the bibliography served as an invaluable course-related resource.<sup>41</sup>

In another required monograph for this seminar, *It's a Black White Thing* (2014), South African history takes center stage. To the historian's standard list of documentary evidence, Donna Bryson—a long-time reporter and later Bureau Chief for the Associated Press in Johannesburg, South Africa— adds information gleaned from many hours of oral history interviews with students, faculty, staff, and administrators at the University of the Free State (UFS), one of South Africa's oldest historically white institutions of higher learning. With the assistance of the staff of CSU's Center for Instructional Technology and Distance Learning, students were able to participate in a videoconference with Bryson, who agreed to answer questions about her work from her home in Colorado.<sup>42</sup>

While conducting research for the book, Bryson learned of the special relationship between UFS and CSU. Both institutions are among the many international partners in the UFS Leadership for Change Program, which continues to send outstanding student leaders abroad, so that they can study diversity in a variety of contexts, even as South Africans continue to struggle with the vestiges of apartheid and the nation's racialized past. UFS hosted the Global Leadership Summit that brought a delegation of CSU students, faculty, and staff members to South Africa in 2012, and UFS Rector Jonathan Jansen—a Fulbright alumnus with a PhD from Stanford University—also holds an honorary doctorate from CSU. He is the first Black to hold the top post at UFS.<sup>43</sup>

Jansen faced huge challenges as he planned his strategy for bridging the racial divide between White Afrikaners and South Africa's people of color. In describing some of those challenges, Bryson wrote,

Jansen also had to tackle the quandary of why young South Africans who had no real memory of apartheid were replicating their parents' approach to race relations. Many young Afrikaners, Jansen knew from his years on the staff at the University of Pretoria, come from isolated farming communities and small towns. And with the end of apartheid, many had absorbed their parents' uncertainty about their place in a new South Africa, and taken on their sense of fear and loss...

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<sup>38</sup> Curnow, *At Home in Africa*, 214.

<sup>39</sup> Curnow, *At Home in Africa*, 263-278.

<sup>40</sup> For a complete listing of the sources licensed through Creative Commons, please see Curnow, *At Home in Africa*, ii.

<sup>41</sup> Curnow, *At Home in Africa*, 279-286.

<sup>42</sup> Donna Bryson, *It's a Black White Thing* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2014). The distance learning session with Donna Bryson took place on February 23, 2015. Special thanks to Mark Hackett, Video Conferencing Specialist with CSU's Center for Instructional Technology and Distance Learning, for his support of this activity.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed biography of Dr. Jonathan Jansen, please visit the website for the University of the Free State at <http://www.ufs.ac.za/adhoc-pages/rectorate/prof-%28jd%29-jonathan-jansen>.

Many of the black students also came from rural areas. Even those who were politicized did not have much experience living and working with white South Africans. Apartheid had seen to that. To counter this, Jansen devised a plan aimed at “complicating their cultural and linguistic and political lives.” [. . .]He focused on first-year students, fresh from their farms and small towns, as well as from the cities, because they had not yet been molded by university tradition... [B]y 2013 the F1 participants had grown to 150 students, who were sent to some of the finest universities in Asia, West Africa, Europe, and the US.<sup>44</sup>



Dr. Regennia N. Williams (third from right) and participants in the UFS Leadership for Change program during a 2011 visit to CSU. (Photo courtesy Regennia N. Williams)

In her conclusion, Bryson wrote, “[A]s I listened to the stories of South Africans, I was struck by how much they had learnt (sic) by getting away from home. And listening to them, I also realized how much I’ve learnt from leaving my own homeland.”<sup>45</sup> Over time, peace activist Leymah Gbowee would make similar statements as a result of her dramatically different experiences in West Africa.

The civil war in Liberia, a nation with a history of ties to the United States of America dating to the early nineteenth century, is examined in Gbowee’s memoir *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War* (2011). Written with journalist Carol Mithers—and introduced to HIS 401 seminar students by Liberian native Joy Yokie—this book chronicles the rise of Liberian women’s peace initiatives during the late twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> The author was a co-recipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize—along with Liberia’s first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Tawakul Karmen, a Yemini journalist and peace activist. In awarding the prize, the Nobel committee said that Leymah Gbowee:

. . .mobilised [sic] and organised [sic] women across ethnic and religious dividing lines to bring an end to the long war in Liberia, and to ensure women’s participation in elections. She has since worked to enhance the influence of women in West Africa during and after war.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Bryson, *It’s a Black White Thing*, 92-93.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-234.

<sup>46</sup> Leymah Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War* (New York: Beast Books, 2011). CSU alumna Joy Yokie is a master’s degree candidate in Kent State University’s School of Library Science.

<sup>47</sup> For more information on this on the recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, please read the BBC story at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15211861> or the story on the Nobel Prize website at [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/).

The book tells the story of the 14-year-long war, the unimaginable levels of violence inflicted upon Liberia's civilian population, and the role of Gbowee and other Christian and Muslim women in creating a climate that was conducive to peace. Their weapons of choice included prayer vigils, interfaith religious services, marches, sit-ins, and other non-violent tactics. The war had broken out just as Gbowee graduated from high school in 1989. It ended in 2003 with a negotiated cease-fire among warring factions and the indictment of President Charles Taylor on charges of war crimes.<sup>48</sup> For Gbowee, the war was transformative to say the least. In its wake, the single mother of six continues to champion the human and civil rights of all women—regardless of religion, race, and ethnicity.

## Conclusion

*So long,  
So far away  
Is Africa.  
Not even memories alive  
Save those that history books create . . .*

--Langston Hughes, "Afro-American Fragment"<sup>49</sup>

On June 30, 2010, I boarded a plane in Lagos, Nigeria for the first leg of a journey that would take me back to my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. As I prepared to publish this essay in 2016, I was over 300 miles away from Cleveland—and even further away from Nigeria, Liberia, and South Africa. Nevertheless, the three R's are ever present. Today, religion, race, and rights are as vital to our understanding of Africa as they were in 1970, when Kenyan-born theologian and scholar John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* was first hailed as a groundbreaking work. On Easter Sunday 2015, with the end of my teaching career at CSU in sight, and just days after the slaughter of more than 100 Kenyan college students by Muslim gunmen, Nigeria's outgoing president, Goodluck E. Jonathan, used social media, rather than a book, to reach out to members of the global community, knowing that many other European, Asian, and African nations—including his native Nigeria, were also plagued by sectarian and political violence.<sup>50</sup>

Social media in general, and Facebook and Twitter in particular, are important vehicles for reaching global audiences. I would, nevertheless, be remiss if I did not end this review of the subject literary journey by referencing two recent and incredibly informative books: Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.'s *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (2014) and Jacob K. Olupona's *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (2014). In approximately 150 pages, both authors manage to discuss centuries of religious history, and major debates and open questions about their respective topics. Both pocket-sized volumes also include indexes and extensive bibliographies.

In Olupona's work, one finds a discussion of the intellectual climate that, no doubt, influenced Mbiti. Noting that, "In the 1960s, African universities encouraged a revitalized study of

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<sup>48</sup> For the details of the beginning and ending of the war, see, especially chapters 2 and 16 in Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*.

<sup>49</sup> To read "Afro-American Fragment" in its entirety, along with other Hughes poems, please see Arnold Rampersad (editor), *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> For more information, please visit President Goodluck Jonathan's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/jonathangoodluck?fref=ts>.

African religions, reflecting Africa's new nation-state status and emergent spirit of freedom and pride," the author goes on to suggest:

Gradually, the study of African religions developed as an autonomous field within the comparative history of religion. However, many of the significant figures who helped develop the field were trained in Christian religious studies, many in theology. Such scholars included John Mbiti, Geoffrey Parrinder, Bolaji Idowu, and Father Placide Tempels. In many cases, these scholars, who had been trained in more conventional religious studies, came to study and teach African traditional religions when they recognized that it was vital for someone to do so. However, their training predisposed them to see African traditional religions through the lens of Christian theology, for which reason their work has often been criticized by subsequent generations of secular scholars. In spite of this, their works often remain quite relevant and indeed have remained durable classics in the field.<sup>51</sup>

It was the recognition of both the criticism and the durability of Mbiti's scholarship that fueled our desire to publish this issue. The results of our research suggest that those who would gain a better understanding of the historiography of African and African-derived religions will likely be referencing Mbiti's pioneering work for some time to come.

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<sup>51</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xxi-xxii. See Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).