

On Òyìnbó: Yorùbá Religion, Resistance, and Polyepistemic Knowledge

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This interdisciplinary paper introduces the term “polyepistemic” to articulate a rigorous and ceaseless process of becoming fluent in multiple ways of knowing and being in the world that privilege African and Africana epistemologies. Non-African devotees, and practitioners of Yorùbá and other Indigenous Africana religious traditions who were not born into them, have a unique responsibility to consciously and deliberately resist the thought patterns of white supremacy and put their spiritual and physical energy towards the elimination of coloniality and systematic racism. The paper addresses the globalization of Yorùbá religion and incorporates the sacred literature of Ifá as evidentiary text in an exploration of the role of white practitioners. Two verses of Ogbèyèkú, the 17th Odù, inform this analysis. One illuminates the ancient relationship between the Orişà Olókun and òyìnbó, or white people. The other highlights the dangers of forsaking Indigenous products and beliefs.

Keywords: Yorùbá, Ifá, Indigenous epistemology, Africana religions, decolonization, whiteness, resistance, freedom

Introduction

This paper is intended to be a contribution to dialogue among both scholars and practitioners about the responsibilities of non-African participants in Africana religious traditions. I am uniquely positioned to address this subject as a white, English-speaking Iyánífá who has developed close relationships with communities of Yorùbá devotees in Oyo, Nigeria, Havana, Cuba, and the United States. In the year 1981, the late Oḡni of Ifẹ, Aláyélúwà Oba Okunadé Şíjúwadé, Olúbùşẹ II, installed Professor Wande Abimbọla as Awìşẹ Agbáyẹ, Spokesperson of Ifá for the whole world. Professor Abimbọla’s gift of interpreting and analyzing Ifá literature was thus recognized and formalized. This Oḡni, also known as the Àrólé Odùduwa¹ and Oḡnirìşà², drew attention to the globalization of Yorùbá religion by honoring Tony Van Der Meer of the United States and Surinam, Chiu Ming (Miguel) Ho of Venezuela and Taiwan, and myself with a royal chieftancy title: Asojú Èsin ati Àsà Yorùbá. It is in this capacity as Ambassador of Yorùbá Religion and Culture that I speak, to implore other white people who are involved in Africana religious traditions to engage in the hard work of chipping away at white supremacy.

This paper is greatly informed by Ifá texts that explore the roles and responsibilities of white people and other non-African practitioners, Babalola Yai’s framing of the globalization of Yorùbá religion, and the unquantifiable Indigenous Yorùbá Knowledge of Wande Abimbọla. Its purpose is not to advocate for the right of white people to participate in Africana religions, but to explore some ideas of globalization and decolonization in the context of the Yorùbá/Africana diaspora. I will make a case for why white people who are involved in Africana religions have a moral, ethical,

¹ The authority of the Oḡni stems from his historical and biological connection with the Orişà Odùduwà, the progenitor of the Yorùbá race. Àrólé Odùduwà can be translated as “the person who makes the House of Odùduwà to stand erect (i.e. all of Yorùbáland).” Oḡnirìşà means, “the king who is also a divinity.”

² The living king with the power of a divinity.

and sacred obligation to deliberately engage in the work of polyepistemic decolonization and the elimination of anti-Black racism.

I introduce the word “polyepistemic” to describe the internalization of a multiplicity of knowledge systems that do not have any implied hierarchy of value, in a conscious and deliberate attempt to resist the thought patterns of white supremacy. This term will be analyzed in more depth later in this paper, but first, I will outline the theoretical framework that informs the present analysis and some elements of my personal and conceptual orientation. Finally, I will cite and interpret two verses of the Odù Ifá,³ Ogbèyèkú, in detail to buttress the analysis. Given that Ifá is considered the Yorùbá god of wisdom and divination, whose knowledge knows no limits of time or space⁴, the present discussion of epistemological resistance is rooted in Ifá.

Background

The survival and expanding reach of Yorùbá and other Africana religions in the Afro-Atlantic diaspora is proof of the fact that the lived practice of Indigenous⁵ Africana epistemologies is a form of spiritual resistance to the violent atrocities of the interdependent systems of racism, slavery, colonialism, evangelism, and socio-economic oppression. Given that Yorùbá religion and culture are quickly becoming globalized, the issue of white people in the Yorùbá religion is urgently relevant. As Babalola Oḷabiyi Yai writes, “We now have a much broader spectrum of worshippers of all races with tremendous diversity in educational background, cultural exposure, including, especially, exposure to Yorùbá and African culture, professional experience, and skills.”⁶

As Yorùbá and Africana religions and cultures increase their territorial influence, it would be foolhardy to deny that these are, indeed, world religions with participants from a multiplicity of home knowledges and historical experiences. It is in this context that it becomes important for both scholars and practitioners to be in dialogue about the role of white people and non-Africans.

³ Ifá is the Yorùbá divinity who bequeathed a vast system of sacred, orally-transmitted literature coded into sections called Odù. Each of the 256 Odù contains about 800 stories. When the verses are chanted during divination, a priest of Ifá is able to help a supplicant make connections between the most ancient inhabitants of the earth and their own situation. I propose that Ifá also provides us with evidentiary texts that can shed light on topics of interest that are encoded within this complex organizational system. A functional Ifá priest should be able to engage at length and in depth with Ifá literature.

⁴ Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá* (Paris: UNESCO, 1975).

⁵ Although the word “Indigenous” connotes a geo-cultural connection to the land, I feel it is most appropriate to refer to Africana Religions as Indigenous by dint of the centrality of the Ancestors, the natural world, and their continued existence as the ancestral religions of Africana peoples outside the parameters of coloniality. I choose to capitalize the phrase “Indigenous Knowledge” in honor of the groundbreaking work of Marie Battiste, Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, and other Indigenous scholars who employ capitalization as one tool of resistance to colonization and subordination (see Marie Battiste and James (Sa’ke’j) Youngblood Henderson, “Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge in Eurocentric Education,” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 32, no. 1 (2009): 5–18; Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy and Emma Maughan, “Indigenous Knowledges and the Story of the Bean,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.

⁶ Oḷabiyi Babalola Yai, “Yorùbá Religion and Globalization: Some Reflections,” in *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 238.

Although my positionality as an Ìyánífá⁷ leads me to write about Yorùbá religion and Ifá in particular, it is my intention to raise issues that might apply to other Indigenous contexts as well.

White practitioners of Africana religions are guests in a story of endurance that spans the cycles of time, and they should always be on their best behavior. Professor Olabiyi Yai speaks to the significance of positionality when he notes the influence of circumstance and author bias on the expansion of Yorùbá religious traditions.⁸ For that reason, I must confess pieces of my own narrative and my efforts to move beyond self-centered individualism, renounce whiteness with continued reflexivity, and flow into relational ways of knowing and being in the world.

In the Yorùbá language, the term “òyìnbó” refers to white people or non-Yorùbás. The Ifá verses in this paper offer more insight into the etymology and mythical history of the word. In the present context, when highlighting the need for white people to become polyepistemic, it is significant to note that the morpheme “bó” means “to peel.” This is a powerful metaphor for the process of renouncing whiteness, of peeling off the identity and unearned privileges associated with being an ontological oppressor. Professor Yai notes that the idea “presupposes a process of ‘unlearning’ from the òyìnbó” who would then become “second degree òyìnbòs in the sense that they should peel (bó) and jettison (bọ) their imperial mantle of ingrained epistemological superiority and hegemony.”⁹

As a white woman from the United States who has been devoted to Africana religion for close to thirty years, this work is both deeply personal and profoundly relational. Although I was raised as an English monolingual, I have endeavored to develop proficiency in several languages, including Yorùbá and Spanish. My spiritual, social, racial, political, and academic journeys are not only intertwined; they are one. More often than not, this path has led me to places where my white presence is an anomaly. Responsible practice, therefore, requires that whiteness is addressed in a manner that does not center it, but makes space for interrogation.

I recall a conversation that I had with a brilliant professor at a spiritual family gathering almost two decades ago. Like many Americans, this priestess of Šàngó and Ifá strongly opposes the presence of any white people in Black spaces—particularly in Yorùbá communities. She challenged me, asking what business did I think I had worshipping the gods of Black peoples. To this day, I regret my reply.

Despite having worked for years as an anti-racism trainer, I had not practiced how I would respond to such a question. In trying to bare my soul, I floundered. Rather than clearly stating how my Orí had put me on this path mysteriously since childhood, and that I was firmly committed to doing the painful spiritual work around what white people of the world have done, I muttered some Transcendental Meditation-esque idea about how if enough people were to bow down before the gods of Africa, then perhaps humanity could attain a critical mass that could unseat racism.¹⁰ The priestess I so admired then scornfully replied, “So you think you’re *helping* us?”

⁷ Literally translated as “Mother in Ifá,” an Ìyánífá is a fully initiated female priest of Ifá, the Yorùbá divinity of divination, wisdom, literature, and problem-solving. Also known as Eléríí Ìpín, “Witness of Destiny,” Ifá has an intimate knowledge of the life path of every human being and other living things.

⁸ Yai, “Yorùbá Religion and Globalization,” 236.

⁹ Olabiyi Babalola Yai, email communication, July 2018.

¹⁰ Christina Sarich, “Scientific Proof the Next Global Meditation Can Change the World,”

It was too late for correction; I had cast myself in the role of white savior. Through reflection, it became clear to me why many Black devotees of Africana religions object to any white people in those spaces, irrespective of the stage of their racial identity development.¹¹ Since then, I am ever-conscious of my racial presence, and do not enter where I am uninvited. I realize and respect the importance of Black-only spaces, and I consciously honor those boundaries. I do not take a seat at the proverbial table unless I am asked to do so. I do not presume to cross the boundary of a person's shrine or engage in rituals unless my presence is requested. Part of freedom is being able to choose those with whom we associate.

I do not discriminate at my own altar—on any basis, including race or the controversial issue of sexual orientation. People who gather in my home for food, camaraderie, or spiritual work have decided to be there of their own volition; likewise, some have actively chosen to be absent. People come and go at will, and I have deliberately avoided instituting an *ilé* system¹² in an effort to resist the hierarchy and power dynamics that often accompany that model. Similar to Kyrá Malika Daniels's characterization of Maya Deren, the Ukrainian-American priest and scholar of Haitian Vodou, I have chosen to become “enmeshed in a ritual kinship system” built around a community that extends “far beyond the boundaries of mortal geographies.”¹³

The concurrent processes of *conscientização*¹⁴ and decolonization require constant vigilance on the part of those of us who come from the line of historical oppressors, for white people can too easily slip back into the ways of privilege, supremacy, profit and epistemicide.¹⁵ A polyepistemic approach to the possible ways of knowing and being in our spiritual communities might offer an antidote.

Decolonization: Toward a Polyepistemic Way of Knowing and Being

The erasure of Indigenous land, languages, cultures, religions and peoples, combined with state-sanctioned murders of dehumanized Black bodies, are but gruesome human sacrifices to keep the system of white supremacy alive. In advocating for polyepistemic ways of knowing and being in the world, I emphasize the need to refer both academically and spiritually to Indigenous Knowledges, narratives, stories, histories, and multiple identities. Just as polylingual individuals speak multiple languages with comparable levels of proficiency, polyepistemic knowledge requires a multifaceted, nonhierarchical fluency in several ways of knowing and being in the world. Given

The Mind Unleashed, July 21, 2017, <https://themindunleashed.com/2017/07/scientific-proof-next-global-meditation-can-change-world.html>.

¹¹ Sandra M. Lawrence and Beverly Daniel Tatum, “White Racial Identity and Anti-Racist Education: A Catalyst for Change,” *Teaching for Change*, 2012,

https://www.teachingforchange.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/08/ec_whiteracialidentity_english.pdf.

¹² *Ilé*, known as *terreiro* in Brazil, literally means “house.” In Yorubaland, the term is used to describe an ancestral section of town where extended family live. In the Diaspora, *ilé* refers to a community-based system in which members of a spiritual family share a sacred space and its corresponding functionalities. Many are organized around a knowledgeable leader, or head, and members might be given different roles according to their status.

¹³ Kyrá Malika Daniels, “Whiteness in Ancestral Waters: Race, Religion, and Conversion within North American Buddhism and Haitian Vodou,” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 23 (2018): 93

¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 35.

¹⁵ Epistemicide: the systematic murder of Indigenous epistemologies. See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).

that institutionalized knowledge is, itself, a function of western thought, direct engagement with Yorùbá and other Indigenous Africana epistemologies provides at least some measure of balance to a system that is inherently racist in nature.

Kwasi Wiredu masterfully outlines the relationship between language, thought, and (de)colonization. He emphasizes that in the “highly conceptual” process of decolonization, “language stands preeminent.”¹⁶ As language and belief were pillars of colonialism, they go hand in hand in the process of decolonization. It is especially crucial, therefore, for white devotees of Africana religions to develop linguistic competence in the Indigenous languages of the religious traditions they espouse. If one is only able to conceptualize, practice, and describe an Indigenous Africana religion through the language patterns and thought systems of Europe, the continued imposition of colonial paradigms and dichotomies is virtually unavoidable. Wande Abimbola rightfully states that free public education, conducted in a European language from childhood, is the cornerstone of ongoing slavery and colonization. He explains the violence of the “conceptual space” in a person’s mind being “occupied” by a language that is not that person’s mother tongue.¹⁷ Polyepistemology, then, requires a commitment to linguistic fluency parallel to deep engagement with and practice of Indigenous Africana spiritual traditions.

Through polyepistemic ways of knowing and being in the world, white people might begin to resist their historical roles as settler-colonists, slave raiders, and supremacists. They become willing participants, rather than accidental actors, in the experiential process of transformation. Charles Long explains that religious porosity, an idea first expressed by Susan Buck-Moss, requires a reimagining of the world for colonists, enslaved, and Indigenous peoples, despite drastically different experiences of brutality.¹⁸ Intentional adoption of a polyepistemic way of life has the potential to transform religious porosity into spiritual and epistemological resistance.

By including *Ese Ifá* (Ifá verses and stories) as evidence, I am making a careful attempt to challenge an academic value system that privileges western, Eurocentric epistemologies over those of Indigenous peoples. In so doing, I hope to further Susan James’s work in support of “the epistemic centering of Indigenous philosophies.”¹⁹ The process of decolonization requires a fundamental shift in the knowledge systems that are given preference, positioning interconnected, Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world as the keys to an analysis that has the potential to subvert the epistemic dominance²⁰ of European thought systems.

Thus, I offer *Ifá* verses to serve as historical and evidentiary texts, and as narratives from the Spirit world that offer insight into earthly questions. Denise Martin advocates for a “Vodou methodology” as an alternative to the destructive effects of Eurocentric research on Africana

¹⁶Kwasi Wiredu, cited in Okot P’Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship*, new revised edition (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011), xvi.

¹⁷Wande Abimbola, *Ifá Will Mend our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora* (Roxbury, MA: Aim Books, 1997), 168.

¹⁸Jared Hickman, “Globalization and the Gods, Or the Political Theology of ‘Race,’” *Early American Literature* 45, no. 1 (2010), 165.

¹⁹Susan James, “Indigenous Epistemology Explored through Yorùbá Orisha Traditions in the African Diaspora,” *Women & Therapy* 41 no. 1-2 (2018): 115.

²⁰Jeannie Kerr, “Western Epistemic Dominance and Colonial Structures: Considerations for Thought and Practice in Programs of Teacher Education,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 83–104.

peoples that neglects the Spirit realm as a harbinger of knowledge that is explained through myth. She advocates for intellectual inquiry that includes myth and the Spirit world as valid primary sources.²¹ In this vein, here Ifá literature is both source and body of knowledge.

Ifá serves as text (or mythos) that can identify and explain “a spiritual cause to phenomena in the physical world.”²² In addition, when Ifá/Orùnmilá is invited into the physical world through by a learned Babaláwo or Ìyánifá through the rituals of divination and ẹbọ (sacrifice or offering), Ifá also functions to predict and control lived experiences, important functions of religion as defined by Robin Horton.²³ Yai is clear in his assertion that “orality remained the medium of globalization”²⁴ as Yorùbá religion spread across time, place, and ethnicities. Ifá is, significantly, the ultimate evidence of the power of orality to sustain connections between those on Earth and those in the Spirit world. Polyepistemic knowledge insists that we not only grow in language, practice, and belief, but also insofar as sources of knowledge are concerned.

It is important, then, for white devotees of Yorùbá religion to move away from the role of oppressor, consciously reconsider ideas about valid knowledge, and adjust their epistemologies accordingly. In so doing, they will not only affect themselves, but their example will affect the world around them. In shifting away from a worldview that categorizes Indigenous religions and epistemologies as inferior or subscientific, non-African practitioners engage in the active process of becoming fully human in a dehumanizing world. Paulo Freire incontrovertibly explains that when we are aware of our own incompleteness, we are able to choose whether we want to strive toward humanization or dehumanization, knowing full well that whichever we choose is for ourselves as much as anyone else.²⁵

The eternal quest for human completion, Freire posits, can be described as a process of *conscientização*.²⁶ Freire deals with the deep truth of what it means to be free; what it means to be an oppressor or a freedom fighter; and the dangers of simply flipping oppression upside-down rather than becoming co-creators in a new society. His warning that none of us are free if all of us are not free, and that the oppressor’s lack of freedom is the result of active or complicit participation in oppression, is uniquely relevant to non-Africans in Africana religions. They must be urgently involved in the endless, non-linear, unfinished project of becoming more and more human.

Moving into a state of freedom from oppressed/oppressor to liberation is a conversion,²⁷ a deliberately religious term. The great James H. Cone describes the experience of conversion as a radical overhaul of one’s very existence--“a change of *being*.”²⁸ Freire writes: “Conversion to the

²¹ Denise Martin, “African Mythic Science or Vodou Methodology,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 4 (June 2012): 96.

²² Ibid.

²³ Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁴ Yai, “Yorùbá Religion and Globalization,” 238.

²⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 43.

²⁶ Ibid., 35.

²⁷ The word “conversion” cannot be used without acknowledging the deeply problematic history of religious conquest among Indigenous and African peoples. The seismic shift from participation in oppression to participation in liberation, likewise, is a complete overhaul of being. Therefore, a term with such fierce religious connotation is appropriate.

²⁸ James H. Cone, *A Black Liberation Theology: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 103.

people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.”²⁹ In this case, conversion requires peeling away the layers of unfettered whiteness.

The idea that a violent struggle for freedom liberates even the oppressor of his need to be freed from the psychological damage caused by being an oppressor,³⁰ that it is an act of love, may be appealing to some non-Africans who would like to benefit from the power of Yorùbá religion to transform lives. It is dangerous, however, to assign the oppressed not only the task of self-liberation, but also liberation of the oppressor.³¹ At some point, white people must stand up and violently shed themselves of the property of whiteness³² that enables them to be oppressors in a diasporic society. This rebirth ignites a polyepistemic (co)existence.

This can only be done in concert with, and in deference to, the people whose ancestral roots stretch to the sources of Indigenous Africana ways of knowing and being in the world. bell hooks eloquently explains that, in the process of resisting oppression, we are involved in the never-ending process of *becoming*. Her remembrance of her childhood friendship with a white boy during desegregation is a sharp metaphor for the necessary experience of non-African people who bind themselves to Africana religions, and, in so doing, to Africana peoples:

We had no illusions. We knew there would be obstacles, conflict, and pain. In white supremacist capitalist patriarchy—words we never used then—we knew we would have to pay a price for this friendship, that we would need to possess the courage to stand up for our belief in democracy, in racial justice, in the transformative power of love. We valued the bond between us enough to meet the challenge.³³

The element of love and the struggle for racial justice cannot be extrapolated from the responsibilities of white people, especially those who are close to Yorùbá religion. Through their religious and cultural relationships with the heritage of Africana peoples, they have assumed a spiritual and societal obligation to dispossess the oppressor of his or her power, even if that oppressor is the self.

Wande Abimbola recognizes that the results of the process of transformation require that caretakers (and practitioners) of Yorùbá religion handle it carefully, with love and respect. He writes:

“The world of Ifá is...eternal and timeless. But change as a dynamic and creative process is also a part of this world order. This allows Ifá to speak to each age in a language that can be understood. What matters is the context, the agents, and the medium of change. What is also important is the attitude of the agents themselves. Only change that is carried out through a medium of respect and understanding,

²⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

³¹ This keen insight belongs to Professor Eileen de los Reyes. I have absorbed it into my personal epistemology but it is not my own.

³² Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91.

³³ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 25–26.

that is not imposed or vulgarized, will stand the test of time and lead to a multiple effect of greater creativity.”³⁴

I would propose that the greater creativity he hopes for can only come when Yorùbá religious practices are combined with resistance to colonialism, racism, and oppression.

Segun Gbadegesin offers the idea of “an authentic African personality which is the pillar of survival in a multi-racial world.”³⁵ This is, perhaps, the only antidote to what Ngugi wa Thiong’o has so aptly termed the “cultural bomb”—a racism and colonization of the mind so effective that one begins to despise one’s own mother tongue and indigenous culture.³⁶ Hickman outlines the fact that the practice of Africana religions has always been a form of resistance to the colonial definition of Africana peoples. He describes the limits of “Africanness” (to which I would add African religiosity) within a Judeo-Christianized interpretation of humanity, noting that for both white Europeans and Black Africans, such an identity was seen as “a heretical refusal of the very terms of such a narrative.”³⁷ Therefore, if non-African people are involved in Yorùbá and other Africana religions, they have a profound responsibility to do their own part to dismantle the racist characterization of the people whose ancestors they are worshipping, and to contribute to an active resistance of white, European, Judeo-Christian narratives.

Ìyánifá Ifáloba says that she accepts the involvement of white people in Yorùbá religion as long as they “aren’t trying to co-opt it and to redefine it,” adding that her concern is with the character of those people and their interest in healing and developing the world. Babaláwo Aikulola states that he does not exclude white practitioners so long as they demonstrate honor and love for the tradition’s forebears and cultural practices. He also notes that white people need to be cognizant of context and experience, and resist any urge to control or revise the tradition.³⁸

In the same text, I comment that my Orí³⁹ has always been pushing me toward a spiritual resistance of white supremacy through serving Africana religious traditions. I mention my efforts “not to reproduce racist structures in my practice,” and note that white people have a responsibility to “do something to shift the balance of power and control.”⁴⁰ This necessitates that non-African practitioners must not only study and practice the religion according to the protocols of Indigenous communities, but also that they must remove themselves from positions of authority and resist any inclination to act as a “colonizers who refuse.”⁴¹ Non-Africans in service of the Òrìṣà should not overstep the boundaries of their servitude in any attempt to displace the descendants and culture-bearers of Africana religions. With firm and elegant scholarship, Kyrah Malika Daniels tasks

³⁴ Wande Abimbola, “Continuity and Change in the Verbal, Artistic, Ritualistic, and Performance Traditions of Ifá Divination,” in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona and Rowland O. AbiOdun (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 41.

³⁵ Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1991), 161.

³⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* (Oxford: Currey, 2003), 16.

³⁷ Jared Hickman, “Globalization and the Gods,” 166–67.

³⁸ Tony Van Der Meer, “Spiritual Journeys: A Study of Ifá/Òrìṣà Practitioners in the United States Initiated in Nigeria” (Ph.D. diss., Antioch University, 2017), 152–53.

³⁹ Inner head, spiritual self, destiny.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 134, 153.

⁴¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

“foreigners” who are also initiates into Haitian Vodou with the responsibility of protecting its sacred mysteries, noting the relevance of Patrick Bellegarde-Smith’s assertion that the Spirits will not reveal what they do not want that person to know.⁴²

This reiterates my concern that white practitioners of Yorùbá religion must be involved in a profound and ongoing examination of the historical realities of their religion, and in the global process of decolonization. It is particularly important that non-Africans do not involve themselves in transformative religious processes that belong to the ancestral guardians of the religion. They cannot pick and choose which aspects of the religion and culture fit into their lives and which do not; rather, it is their own lives that must fit into the cosmology and be informed by Yorùbá epistemology. This eliminates the possibility of “eating”⁴³ elements of ancient religious traditions in a buffet-style pick-and-choose, and it also does not provide space for collecting religious traditions like inanimate curio objects.

As a white practitioner of Yorùbá Religion who was born in the United States, I am eternally conscious of the complexities of my role in the practice and dissemination of Indigenous epistemologies. I have renounced both white supremacy and the role of the white liberal as defined by Critical Race Theory (CRT), choosing instead to align myself with the project of authentic decolonization. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain that one of the major themes of CRT is a critique of white liberalism, a sociopolitical ideology that is outwardly committed to an equitable society yet is the true beneficiary of any policy changes it encourages. The scenario the authors describe, in which white people flutter from causes like civil rights to causes like saving the whales, while their self-indulgent efforts leave Black people in an unchanged, or even worse state, is sadly familiar.⁴⁴

Patricia Hill Collins, in her postmodernist analysis of Black Feminist thought, warns against “colonizers who refuse,” a trope that resembles the white liberal of CRT. She writes:

Although [colonizers who refuse] understand how definitions of the colonized as “different” or as “Other” remain central to the way colonialism functions, they oppose colonialism in the abstract while continuing to enjoy its benefits.... If colonialism were abolished and colonized people were to gain power, little privilege would remain within new social relations, even for those who refuse.⁴⁵

In this description, as well, we are presented with a white person who sympathizes with the cause of Africana peoples, but only insofar as the power structure is not actually threatened and, as intermediary, they receive some benefit from their associations with the oppressed. The struggle against becoming a “colonizer who refuses” while working toward polyepistemic knowledge and decolonization requires constant self-awareness and reflection without end.

⁴² Daniels, “Whiteness in Ancestral Waters,” 98.

⁴³ The verb “to eat” is often used in the Yorùbá language to denote when something has become part of one’s being. Phrases such as “The Òrìsà is eating him” or “He ate the chieftancy” speak to a kind of consumption that is not easily expressed in English outside of metaphorical terms.

⁴⁴ Daniels, “Whiteness in Ancestral Waters,” 30.

⁴⁵ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 130.

It is my opinion that the decolonization of a non-African, non-Indigenous mind is a ceaseless educative process. When educational research considers the role of Indigenous and Africana epistemologies, the most prominent concern is that of reducing the so-called “achievement gap,” a construct that assumes the system of standardized assessment is not inherently racist, and that the goal is to fit minoritized peoples into a psychometrics designed for the white masses. The challenge issued here, however, is quite different: let non-Africana practitioners of Africana religions commit themselves to a rigorous, holistic retraining of the mind, body, and spirit such that their ways of knowing and being in the world are affected at the very core. This is the true essence of polyepistemology.

When white people begin to understand the world differently, they will not be able to avoid affecting their environment differently. People will begin to wonder why and how they have changed, from whence does this new internal freedom stem, and how is it manifesting in such meaningful ways. This does not erase their obligations to Africana peoples to work deliberately against systems of oppression and racism, but it is how polyepistemic knowledge begins to multiply and extend its reach beyond the individual into society at large. In “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Wang make an irrefutable case for why epistemic shifts without tangible, structural change do not actually decolonize anything; the relationship between racism and Indigeneity is as undeniable as the connection between slavery and settler colonialism. They assert that the sovereignty and futurity of Indigenous peoples is the crux of authentic decolonization. This is not an addition to the present system of injustice and racism, but a different state of being altogether. They write, “Decolonization is not an ‘and’. It is an elsewhere.”⁴⁶ Accordingly, white practitioners have a moral, ethical, and spiritual duty to remain vigilantly accountable to the Yorùbá people, ensuring that their practice does not damage the culture or its peoples. This requires them to check in regularly with their Africana leaders, and to make no unauthorized adjustments to ritual norms.

J. Kehaulani Kauanui insists that an academic understanding of the “U.S. Republic” without attention to the violence committed against its original inhabitants is insufficient. This also requires academics to engage with settler colonialism as a structure, rather than a historical event.⁴⁷ In context for white practitioners of Africana religions, this often means deliberately removing oneself from processes of decision making, leaving it to descendants of the Ancestors who guarded against the attempted extermination of these ancient knowledge systems. It also means not seeking to place oneself in a position of go-between that usurps Yorùbá people’s right to speak for themselves, design their own religious systems and transformations, and create formats free from colonizing tendencies. Finally, non-Africana people must be conscious not to profit from this work in such a way that their own financial position is advanced while that of the original community members does not change.

Yorùbá as Global Religion

⁴⁶ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 35.

⁴⁷ J. Kehaulani Kauanui, “A Structure, Not an Event: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity,” *Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5, no. 1 (2016): 3.

The term “Africana” is a salute to the interconnectedness of the peoples whose Ancestors’ origins are on the continent that Europeans so named.⁴⁸ In advocating for rigorous scholarship of African and “diaspora-ed” peoples, Dianne M. Stewart Diakité and Tracey E. Hucks write, “The experiences, ideas, machinations, and inventions that produced multiple Africas over the centuries merit continual engagement and analysis.”⁴⁹ These multiple Africas are in constant, cyclical, ancestral dialogue with one another, and cannot be understood in a vacuum. Professor Òlabiyi Babalola Yai’s analysis of the globalization of Yorùbá religions is germane to the current investigation of the role of white persons. This scholar and diplomat outlines three groups of global Yorùbá practitioners: Africans in the homeland; Africans in the diaspora; and non-Africans. Yai notes that the non-African Yorùbá, in contrast with Africans in the diaspora, tend to belong to the upper-middle classes, and the size of this demographic depends on country and the definition of whiteness.⁵⁰ For the purpose of this analysis, I define “white people” simply as those non-African, non-Indigenous people who self-identify as such. Kólá Abímbólá’s philosophical analysis of Yorùbá religion and culture explains that, despite its identity as an Africana religion, “African-” or “Black” is no longer the single defining characteristic of Yorùbá practitioners.⁵¹

Professor Yai outlines three branches of globalization in Yorùbá religions: West African, Atlantic, and post-Atlantic.⁵² West African globalization refers to the sharing of deities with the neighbors of the Yorùbá, with Ifá/Orùnmílá as the lingua franca—the divinity of wisdom, Èlẹ̀rìí Ìpín (witness of destiny),⁵³ and repository of the vast, sacred oral literary corpus known as Odù. In deference to the foundational and creationist role of Ifá in the globalization of Yorùbá religion, Ifá is my primary source.

Despite systematic attempts to neutralize and exterminate Africana religions in the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora, the custodians of this ancestral knowledge not only kept it alive, but helped it to transform and grow. There are countless iterations of Yorùbá/Africana religion throughout the world, in places where the spirits accompanied their ancestral children and were kept alive by ritual and oral remembering and transformation. This is the second branch of Yai’s model.

Finally, the third branch of Yai’s verbal diagram of Yorùbá globalization is related to the often misunderstood religious syncretism of the Diaspora. Abimbòla may have influenced his friend Yai with his frequent, public declarations that the true syncretism occurred between African religions, not between African religions and Christianity. The interaction between Yorùbá religious traditions and those from other parts of the African continent or from Indigenous American peoples cannot be dismissed.⁵⁴ Professor Wande Abimbòla questions the syncretism that is usually described as an admixture of Indigenous Africana religions and Catholicism.⁵⁵ He pontificates that only Yorùbá iconography was affected by Catholicism, but that “it didn’t affect the real essence of the religion, like the text or the language.”⁵⁶ Africana religions and cultures of the Diaspora are

⁴⁸ Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley and Claudine Michel, eds., *The Black Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁹ Dianne M. Stewart Diakité and Tracey E. Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 28–77.

⁵⁰ Yai, “Yorùbá Religion and Globalization,” 239.

⁵¹ Kólá Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: Ìrókò Academic Publishers, 2005), 365.

⁵² Yai, “Yorùbá Religion and Globalization,” 235.

⁵³ Wande Abimbòla, personal communication, 2008.

⁵⁴ Yai, “Yorùbá Religion and Globalization,” 237.

⁵⁵ Wande Abimbòla, personal communication, 2004.

⁵⁶ Wande Abimbòla, personal communication, 2006.

intertwined in profound ways that speak to the cultural and spiritual unity of practitioners, despite ritual, racial, linguistic, and historical differences. White people must be ever-conscious of the fact that they are the most junior participants in this process.

Most significantly, Laënnec Hubron's insight tells us that globalization is, in many ways, a mere extension of colonialism. With specific reference to Haitian Vodou, he proposes that "its rich cognitive and symbolic systems offer Haitian culture the weapons of resistance to deculturation."⁵⁷ When white people are involved in the commodification, neutralization, and obfuscation of elements of any Africana religious tradition, they are furthering the colonial agenda rather than contributing to human liberation. Elana Jefferson-Tatum's fierce and graceful language explains that polyepistemic knowledge, then, must work "to expose the prostituting, signifying, and discursively violent presence of the Western imperial and historical gaze."⁵⁸

Africana religions have all endured attempted genocide and colonization of language, culture and belief. Amanda D. Concha-Holmes elaborates on the elasticity of Yorùbá religion when she writes, "Instead of a closed-system philosophy that allows but one way, Yorùbá tradition is based on dynamic transformation and process."⁵⁹ That dynamic, elastic process is an incredible testimony to the adage "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Africana religions do not cease being African, regardless of their sociohistorical conditions, syncretisms, or the backgrounds of their practitioners.

Problematizing the anthropological definition of religion as put forth by Clifford Geertz, Talal Asad interprets religious belief as existing outside the pain, confusion and ethical challenges of human existence while offering a means of explanation.⁶⁰ In contrast to the measurement of belief as an index of religiosity, Indigenous Africana religions rely upon action in relationship to a living repertoire of sacred oral texts, icons, and offerings—deemphasizing belief as their defining characteristic.

In this context, what a devotee *does* matters more than what a devotee *believes*. Kólá Ábímbólá writes that "psycholinguistic culture is not just about explicitly proclaimed beliefs, but also about those unstated convictions that implicitly guide and govern practical conduct."⁶¹ This idea of "practical belief" highlights the fact that, in Yorùbá epistemology, there is no dichotomy between belief and action—epistemologies are *lived*.

One problem, among non-Africans who have adopted Yorùbá culture especially, is that "More and more practitioners in the diaspora, especially in the third group, heavily rely on books written by anthropologists on the tradition, with the inevitable misunderstandings, mistranslations,

⁵⁷ Laënnec Hubron, "Globalization and the Evolution of Haitian Vodou," in *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion*, 275–76.

⁵⁸ Elana Jefferson-Tatum, "The Violence of Translation: An Indigenous World-Sense and the Western 'Prostitution' of Dahomean Bodies," *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 3 (2015): 279–324.

⁵⁹ Amanda D. Concha-Holmes, "Decolonizing the Imaging of African-Derived Religions," in *Afrodendants, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas*, ed. Bernd Reiter and Kimberly Eison Sommons (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 245.

⁶⁰ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 46.

⁶¹ Kólá Ábímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: Ìròkò Academic Publishers, 2005), 1383.

and Eurocentrism.”⁶² It becomes essential for non-African practitioners of Africana religions to study with a discerning eye, and not to underestimate the importance of developing polyepistemic knowledge through humility and direct apprenticeship with Indigenous Africana elders. It is in this manner that Africana epistemologies become more alive than belief alone.

Evidence: Interpretation of Ifá Text

Professor Yai observes that, throughout the historical movements of Africana religions, “orality remained the medium of globalization.”⁶³ For the Yorùbá, the pinnacle of orality is the Ifá literary corpus. I had the good fortune to discuss my suspicion that the sacred oral literature of Ifá would shed further light on the issue of white people in Yorùbá religion with Professor Wande Abimbòla. The late King of the Yorùbá people, His Royal Highness Ọ̀ṣoni of Ifẹ̀, Aláyélúwà Ọ̀ba Okùnádé Šìjúwadé, Olúbùšẹ̀ II, Ọ̀ṣoni of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ Olúbùšẹ̀ (the birthplace of humanity⁶⁴) says that Abimbòla’s “Ifá chieftancy title...attests to his exalted position among members of the king’s inner circle of palace senior diviners (Awo-Ọ̀ṣoni)...Professor Abimbòla remains the most knowledgeable scholar-practitioner of Ifá in his generation.”⁶⁵

Abimbòla, Àwìšẹ̀ Awo ní Àgbáyé, chanted the following verse of Ogbèyèkú, the 17th Odù in the sacred literature of Ifá, in response to my question as to whether Ifá had anything to say about white people’s role in the religion:

- 1 Ogbèyèkú ni Baba Àmúlù
Orí agbó, Orí atọ̀ ni Baba Ẹ̀dan
A dífá fẹ̀èbó
Ọ̀mọ̀ afòkun sèrè bọ
- 5 Eyí tájé o filée rẹ̀ šẹ̀ ọ̀nà
Àrà tèèbó ní dá lókun
Kò le bàjẹ̀ láláláí
Gbogbo wọ̀n ní ní gún reketẹ̀
Lójú omi.

- 1 Ogbèyèkú is the Father of the Minor Odù
Orí agbó, Orí atọ̀ are the true meaning of Ẹ̀dan.
These are the names of the Ifá priests who divined for Òyìnbó
Offspring of those who worship the ocean as their own beautiful icon
- 5 In whose house Ajé will make a path to tread upon⁶⁶
Wonderful things that white people do on the oceans
Can never be spoiled
All of them are floating beautifully

⁶² Yai, “Yorùbá Religion and Globalization,” 241.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Various myths, legends and stories enshrined in Ifá, the Sacred Text of Yorùbá Religion, proclaim Ile-Ife to be the place where the Earth and all its inhabitants were created...The belief in Ile-Ife as the cradle of life is one of the key elements of Yorùbá culture in Africa and the Diaspora” (Kólá Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture*, 349).

⁶⁵ His Royal Highness Ọ̀ba Okùnádé Šìjúwadé, Olúbùšẹ̀ II, “Foreword,” in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power and Performance*, xiv.

⁶⁶ Ajé is the daughter of Olókun and the Òrìšà of wealth.

On top of water.⁶⁷

This verse speaks about ancient times hundreds of years before Europeans demonized, dehumanized and enslaved African people, when the relationship between Africans and Europeans was one of reciprocity and mutually beneficial trade. Abimbola explains that this verse of Ifá refers to a time when the Mediterranean Sea was shared between white and African people, and reciprocal trade was a regular occurrence on the coastlines of West, South, and East Africa into the Indian Ocean. White people were known for their beautiful boats. Sadly, they began to fight among themselves. The oceans became battlegrounds and boats sank; uncountable numbers of people died in the seas. They also lost the support of the Olókun, the female Òrìṣà, King of the Ocean.⁶⁸

This was, of course, long before Europeans ever considered the idea of trading in humans. It is my belief that white people had a primordial, ancestral covenant with Olókun herself, who promised to protect them on their ocean journeys as long as they were traveling to do good. The covenant was shattered when white people started traveling on the seas to kidnap humans from their homes, stealing them from their families for the sake of free labor and personal profit. Since the Yorùbá were the original children of Olókun, the unfathomable evils that Europeans committed against the peoples of West Africa were an unforgivable offense, and the moment such abominable events commenced, their own things started to get spoiled. Olókun's benevolent relationship with white people was contingent upon the fact that they continued to do beautiful things on top of the water. Consequentially, they lost their relationship with both Olókun and the African people that used to be their friends.

Yorùbá epistemology teaches us that all the Earth's bodies of salt water are connected and Olókun is the female King of all the world's seas. Although the Yorùbá of southwest Nigeria conceptualize Olókun as female, other West African knowledge systems worship Olókun as a male divinity. Among the Lukumí of Cuba, people should not be initiated to Olókun, as s/he is considered too deep, profound and powerful to be contained within the body of a human.

Significantly, Olókun is also the Òrìṣà who best exemplifies the dynamic, transformative nature of Yorùbá religion. In West Africa, her manifestation in the natural world is the ocean; yet, during the Middle Passage, her survivance⁶⁹ changed her. In the Cuban and Brazilian diasporas, Yemoja⁷⁰, child of forest-dwelling spirits of Yorùbáland who transformed into the Òògùn River when her husband broke a covenant with her, is now known as the Òrìṣà of the surface, shallow parts of the ocean. The most prominent feature of Olókun's diasporic identity now lives in the deepest abysses of the sea.

Since the ancient times of Ifá, Africans and Òyìnbó (white people) have interacted in mutually beneficial and detrimental ways, reflecting the nature of humans' role in the constant interplay between the positive and negative forces in the spiritual world. Ifá relates that the essence

⁶⁷ Wande Abimbola, personal communication, 2012.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Resistance through Indigenous narratives that challenge the oppressor's erroneous characterization of peoples and their societies. See Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

⁷⁰ Known as Yemayá in Lukumí.

of a person is found in his or her *Orí* (personal destiny) in combination with his or her *Ìwà* (character). The goal of human life is to become *Ọmọ́lúàbí*, or someone who exemplifies good and honest character, *Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ̀*. Another verse of *Ifá* teaches us that “*Sùùru ni Baba Ìwà*” (“patience is the father of good character”).

The greatest achievement of a *Yòrúbá* person is to embody the names of the ancient *Babaláwos* in the verse above.⁷¹ “*Orí agbó*” means someone with an inner head that allows them to live until old age; “*Orí atọ́*” means someone with an inner head that allows them to live long in good health. Priests of *Ifá* generally greet each other with the phrase, “*Àború, àbọyè, àbọsíṣe*”—May our sacrifices be accepted; may our sacrifices thrive forever; may our sacrifices bring the good results we are longing for. The expected response is, “*Ogbó atọ́. Àsúre Ìwòrì wòfún,*” or “May you have long life and good health in old age, with the blessings of the *Odù Ìwòrì Ọ́fún.*”⁷² This call and response salutation speaks to the ancient *Babaláwos* whose names are “*Orí agbó*” and “*Orí atọ́*” in the verse of *Ogbèyèkú* cited above.

The other part of the *Babaláwo*’s name, “*Orí agbó, Orí atọ́ ni Baba Ẹdan,*” tells us *Orí agbó, Orí atọ́* is the father of *Ẹdan*. *Ẹdan* is an important brass icon of two humans (often one male and one female) who are linked together. Although this symbol is generally associated with the *Ògbóni* society, it is also part of the iconography *Ọṣún*, the *Òrìṣà* of motherhood, family, beauty and healing. I would posit that this ancient *Babaláwo*’s name is telling us that the key to a healthy, vibrant long life with all of its faculties intact is the maintenance of balanced, peaceful relationships. In violating their covenant with *Olókun* and her West African children, white people have lost touch with *Orí agbó, Orí atọ́ ni Baba Ẹdan*, whose very identity is a long, healthy, contented life.

This brief analysis of one small verse of *Ifá* reveals, at the very least, that the knowledge of *Ifá* is profound, and that its epistemology is of the utmost importance. *Yai* wonders how non-Africans consider themselves *Yorùbá* without learning some *Ifá*: “The problem then is, without a thorough engagement with its *deep knowledge* component can religious groups that use some aspect of *Òrìṣà* tradition still lay legitimate claim to *Yorùbáness*?”⁷³

Another verse of the same *Odù* sheds further light on the subject at hand.

1 *Ogbèyèkú ni baba Amúlù*
 Orí agbo, orí atọ́
 Ni baba Ẹdan
 Á dífá fún Ọ́nrò
5 *Tí ń sawo ó rẹ̀lú Ẹ̀èbó*
 Ọ́nrò, o wá á torí idùn
 Lo bá kú sínú eja.

1 *Ogbèyèkú is the Father of the Minor Odù*
 Orí agbo, Orí atọ́ are the true meaning of Ẹdan.

⁷¹ In *Ifá* literature, the names of the ancient *Babaláwos* are usually a moral or proverb-like message unto themselves.

⁷² Wande Abimbola, personal communication, 2012: “*Ìwòrì Ọ́fún* is an *Odù* of *Ifá* in which there are many prayers and benedictions.”

⁷³ *Yai*, “*Yorùbá Religion and Globalization,*” 244.

- 5 Is the father of Èdan
Cast Ifá for Ònrò
Who went on a divination journey to the land of white people
Ònrò, because of your love of eating sweet things
You died in the belly of a fish.⁷⁴

The Yorùbá term “Òyìnbó”, elided here to “Èèbó,” ordinarily means white person. This word is derived from the first person to be born without melanin in Yorùbáland, who was named Òyì. Because her skin appeared to be whitish, lacking the outermost layer of color, she was given the nickname Obó, “the person whose skin is peeled.” The verb form “bó” means to peel something like you peel a banana, similar to the image of snakes shedding their skin. The city founded by Òyì Obó still exists in Kwara State, Nigeria, and that city is now simply called Obó. Òyì Obó was the progenitor of all white people in the world. Thus, the Yorùbá word for white people expresses the idea that their original Black skin has been peeled away.

Wande Abimbòla helps interpret the second verse of Ogbèyèkú. I have paraphrased his elaborate explanation: Ònrò was a dwarf⁷⁵ who traveled to white man’s country where he became friend [sic] to a white man. But Ònrò could not control his appetite, including his love for fish, which was his host’s [slavemaster’s] favorite diet too. The white person would regularly buy a huge fish and ask Ònrò to fry it for him. The white man would then throw a party for his friends where everyone would cut a bit of the huge fish to eat. When Ònrò’s master brought home the biggest fish either one of them had ever seen, it was Ònrò’s duty to fry it for the party. The smell was so enticing that Ònrò couldn’t help but taste part of it. He so much loved the taste of this fish that he leaned inside the belly of the fish and began eating his way inside. When the white man returned, Ònrò was already deep within the belly of the fish, eating to his satisfaction. Ònrò didn’t want the white man to know where he was or what he had done. The white man then set fire to the huge fish to warm it up for his guests.

As the fish was getting fried, Ònrò was also getting fried. He would move into one side of the belly of the fish if he thought that side was not as hot. He started to move from one part of the belly of the fish to another until he also got fried with the fish. Ònrò literally ate himself to death. Ifá says that if you buy any large West African fish today, you will find tiny black insects inside the belly of the fish. Those insects are called Ònrò, in memory of the man who perished because of his insatiable thirst for its flesh.⁷⁶

The Àwíṣẹ explains that the moral of this verse is that Indigenous peoples should cling to their own ways of life, production, and consumption if self-preservation is to be attained.

The lesson from this is that African peoples should control their insatiable appetite for white people’s products. Since colonial times up til today, peoples of the African continent do not manufacture many things. In fact, before their contact with Europe, Africans smelted their own iron, manufactured their farming implements (hoes, cutlasses, spears, bows and arrows), had factories for production of their own

⁷⁴ Wande Abimbòla, personal communication, 2018.

⁷⁵ Little people are sacred in Yorùbá thought.

⁷⁶ Wande Abimbòla, personal communication, 2018.

clothing materials. African peoples had lots of industries to manufacture their own clothes and the foods that they ate in their rural areas and large cities. But alas, today, all those industries collapsed. And since the last 100 years or more, Africa has depended on European and American, and even today, Chinese manufactured goods, including clothing materials and food items. Ifá says that this insatiable love or lust for of the white man’s products will spell the doom of the African continent.⁷⁷

This verse of Ifá literature also makes a case for why the oppressed, enslaved and colonized peoples of the world should not render themselves invisible in the face of the oppressor. Imagine the plight of Ònrò, perpetually frying fish for the white man and his friends, while he, himself, was not expected to eat. The fundamental problem Ònrò had was that he believed the white man to be his friend when there was no reason to believe he would behave as such. The white man betrayed the covenant he had made by hosting Ònrò when he traveled to a new place to perform his duties as a Babaláwo. A host is not expected to enslave his guest; nor were white people expected to enslave African peoples.

Ifá warns Africana peoples of the spiritual, epistemological, and physical dangers of becoming enamored with the products of the colonizing world. The disproportionate numbers of Black adults who suffer from Type II Diabetes is proof that the large quantities of sugar that have infected most western food is not good for Indigenous communities. The “sweet things” that Ifá alludes to here may also be interpreted as a metaphor for the belief systems of the colonizer, which promise wealth in exchange for betrayal of ancestral knowledge. Just as death consumes Ònrò as he gorges himself on the white man’s fish, Africana ways of knowing and being in the world are in danger of extinction.

For white people, polyepistemic living requires investment in the Indigenous technologies of the Black and Indigenous peoples of the world. This means forsaking the temptations of capitalist consumerism and making deliberate choices to support the products of their spiritual families. Given the sense of entitlement that plagues the white world, an important part of renouncing whiteness is abandoning the eternal quest to amass property and, instead, peel back that well-nurtured instinct in order to value the products of Africana peoples and those who produce them.

This verse of Ifá also makes a strong case for ensuring that Indigenous Yorùbá technology is not swallowed up by a lust for European forms of manufacturing. The great educational philosopher and cultural analyst W. E. B. DuBois links economic independence with racial integrity, and in so doing his ideas can be extended to encourage Africana Indigenous technologies to be available in the wider Diaspora. He refers to the “science” of modern technology, its role in the technological advancement of the western world, and the need to share that technology with African countries to support their progress.⁷⁸ This statement, however, could be inverted as a demand for Indigenous, spiritual, ancestral, scientific and natural knowledge to be foregrounded in the advancement (and preservation) of the world’s nations. Indeed, part of the solution to today’s climate change disaster lies in understanding the sanctity of the natural world, which has always been a guiding principle of Indigenous epistemologies.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: McClury, 1924), 331.

Amanda Concha-Holmes, a psychologist and practitioner of Santería, observes the role of epistemological oppression in her work. Significantly, she also highlights the potential of Africana religions to transform people's relationship with the environment. She writes that "locally significant ways of knowing" must be centralized in environmental discussions, arguing that not doing so "homogenizes myriad distinct African-derived cultures" and sustains their status as subordinate to the current hegemonic system.⁷⁹

It is crucial that efforts to absorb Yorùbá and Africana epistemologies do not result in a homogenization of diverse religions and cultures. Although a relationship does exist, each manifestation of Indigenous Africana religion grows out of a unique history and set of socioeconomic circumstances. The innumerable dialects of the Yorùbá language render it impossible to homogenize even the languages of Ilé-Ifẹ such as Fon, Urhobo, Igbo, the language of the pàtàki⁸⁰, and others.⁸¹ The ritual language of Ifá, however, forms the basis for the diglossia of many Diasporic communities. Also, the standard form of Ifá literature contains both static and dynamic elements that simultaneously allow for continuity and creativity.⁸²

It is essential to embark on the work of discussing Yorùbá and Africana religions on their own terms, and resist the colonial temptation to describe them in terms of the epistemological categories of the colonizer. Hence, when exploring ideas of resistance, it becomes essential to extend the boundaries of European sociolinguistic territory.

Conclusion

A conscious and ceaseless crossing of epistemological borders can weave a web of interconnectedness that, slowly, will become strong enough to decolonize the minds of the oppressors and the oppressed, support Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world, and, perhaps, provide a salve to heal our broken world and create a new beginning in which the earth and her inhabitants are fully alive again. Becoming a practitioner or devotee of a minoritized Africana religious tradition is quite a different phenomenon than committing oneself "to using one's privilege of whiteness/Americanness to build intentional community and collectively uplift one's religious brethren and sistren."⁸³ White practitioners of Yorùbá religions need to engage in a rigorous and ceaseless process of becoming polyepistemic, and allow their actions against oppression to be informed and guided by Indigenous Africana Knowledge systems and peoples. People who practice Yorùbá and other Indigenous Africana religious traditions, but were not born into them, have a unique responsibility to put their spiritual, physical, and economic energies toward the elimination of coloniality and systematic racism.

In closing, I would like to salute the Indigenous peoples of the world who have withstood and survived genocide for centuries. This prayer, used when closing sacrifice, lets us know that there was a relationship between Black and Indigenous people all over the world since ancient

⁷⁹ Amanda D. Concha-Holmes, "Decolonizing the Imaging of African-Derived Religions," in *Afrodendants, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas*, ed. Bernd Reiter and Kimberly Eison Sommons (Detroit: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 261.

⁸⁰ The Lukumí word for Ese Ifá

⁸¹ Yai, Yorùbá Religion and Globalization.

⁸² Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems*, 32.

⁸³ Daniels, "Whiteness in Ancestral Waters," 98.

times:

Ọtún mi àbá
ní Ìwọ̀nràn níbi ojúmọ́ tí í mó ọ̀n wá
Òsì mi àṣẹ
Lágbàáigbò Ifẹ̀ kiibíti

When I stretch my right hand,
I am making wonderful propositions from Ìwọ̀nràn, the place from where the day
dawns⁸⁴
When I stretch my left hand,
I am praying that those propositions should come to pass all over the land of Ifẹ̀.⁸⁵

May all of our collective works be rooted in a polyepistemic way of knowing and being in the world. May we consciously and ceaselessly refuse and resist anti-Black racism in favor of Africana Indigeneity, and contribute to the restoration of our original covenant with the inhabitants of the Earthly, Ancestral, and Spirit worlds. Àṣẹ, àṣẹ, àṣẹ.

Michelle Ajiṣẹbọ McElwaine Abimbọla lives and works in service of the Ancestors, Ifá and Òriṣà. She is proud to be a child of the Nesbit-McElwaine matriarchy, and a member of the Akínṣílọ́lá lineage by marriage. Her husband, mother, and sister are her great partners in life, and her two children are wise teachers and her hope for the future. Ajiṣẹbọ is an interdisciplinary scholar and educator at the secondary and post-secondary levels. She has been honored with the opportunity to grow and build community with her elders, godchildren, and extended family who believe that we are co-inhabitants of the world along with bodies of water, trees, mountains, animals, and other creatures of nature.

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⁸⁴ A reference to the land of Australasia and the ancient relationships among the Black peoples of the world.

⁸⁵ Which has now become anywhere in the world where Africana people live—the ultimate salute to Pan-Africanism.