

# African Indigenous Knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Day 2: 10 September 2016**

### **1.1 African Indigenous Knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Awareness, Access, & Outreach**

African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) is anchored on the land and cultural heritage(s) of African peoples'. AIK is internal, domestic and self-generating information. It manifests through interconnection, and interrelatedness of the body and mind, and can be seen in diverse disciplines and ways of life. As such, it enables us to recognize the complex, collaborative, multi-polar, interactive nature of knowledge, science, and scholarship. The following is a summary of proceeding of talks given by seven speakers at the symposium held on the unceded and ancestral territories of the Coast Salish peoples.

#### **1.1.1 Professor Kwasi Dunyo: Master Drummer, Vodou Priest, Teacher University of Toronto & York University**

*“When we talk about African religion, we are first of all talking about skin, the language we speak, the food we eat, and our way of communication.” Prof Kwasi Dunyo.*

Prof. Dunyo spoke about Vodou religion and way of life using the example of Apetorku Shrine in Dagbamete (Ghana's Volta region). Vodou is characterized by a firm belief that God is all seeing and knowing and responds to the adherents requests and pleas. For instance, “If there is no rainfall, if there is drought, we pour a libation, and call out to God from our sacred shrines, and it rains. There is a special way of doing it.” Vodou teachings encourage love for human beings and are hinged on the belief that you will get the results of whatever you do here on earth. If you do good, you will see good results and conversely, if you do bad, you will see bad results. The law of Karma! Therefore, it is your responsibility to choose your actions and deeds with that understanding in mind. The Apertoku way of life is based on the belief that both heaven and hell are right here on earth. One of the most visible practices of this faith is public confessions which happen during Easter. Thousands of members come and confess in public. You cannot confess to an individual, as one person cannot forgive sins. In essence, this serves as way of weaving the social fabric, ensuring that people take responsibility for their actions, and acts as a way of plugging the psyche. The confession is made by way of offering a chicken as a sacrifice. “You have to be kind to every human being – every one, across the board. That is how our things go!” says Prof. Dunyo. Another angle of Apertorku way of life is making an undertaking for whatever you want in life e.g., for your liberty and success. You cannot make an undertaking to cause harm to anyone. Once you see results of your undertaking you come and pay what you feel is right from your heart. In closing, Prof. Dunyo reflected on the oppression of Canadian indigenous peoples.

*I feel it deep in my heart about the native people. We should not treat them that way, whatever the situation/ That is not the way. They are the only true Canadians on this land. The rest of us are Canadians through paper, not nature. It is against our religion to treat people this way... Sometimes I feel tears coming into my eyes! This is not fair!*

### **1.1.2 Kurai Mubaiwa: Shona Mbira Master**

*“The instrument I was playing is called Mbira from the Shona people in Zimbabwe. It is quite ancient, quite magical, very interesting, and I would say, very clever. The acoustic sound is quite decent, it is not very bad, considering that we were just coming from the far, and we were just using a vegetable type of amplification....a pumpkin or squash, gourd or calabash...calabistro!”*  
**Kurai Mubaiwa.**

Kurai spoke about his passion for playing Mbira and reflected on how he had to ignore all the discouraging voices and keep playing on. The acoustic chamber of the Mbira is made up a gourd. Once the gourd is dry it does not rot and can last for hundreds of years, if taken care of properly. Inside the acoustic chamber you find what Kurai refers to as “the deal”. This is a piece comprising of between 22-28 keys. Kurai started playing the Mbira when he was 7 year old. He quickly mastered the skill and became quite obsessed with the instrument. Discouragement came from all avenues including his own father (who ironically had gifted the instrument to him and told him that it belonged to his grandfather). The missionary assault had categorised this as a pagan practice hence brainwashing the Shona into rejecting their own culture. Mbira was a Shona practice of worship. It was played in ceremonies and rituals into which people transitioned into altered forms of consciousness – trance! Mbira was initially assembled using bamboo keys and then transitioned into iron keys after the Iron Age – this in itself is a testament of African indigenous knowledge systems through technological advancement, and mastery of the environment. The Iron Age positioned the blacksmith at the pinnacle of society because they could forge hoes and other implements which was absolutely critical for agricultural work, and consolidation of the Shona society. Kurai tells us:

*I was born in 1976. At that time this instrument was classified as pagan, heathen or music for the devil. If you go to church and play saxophone you are way cooler. If you go to church and play the church organ, you are way cooler. But, this was disgusting! So, those who were playing this instrument were playing behind closed doors to avoid the shame.*

Kurai joined high school where he forged alliances other students who were not ashamed to be playing traditional instruments from Zimbabwe. They believed that this was their music, their heritage, made by their ancestors, and that they were going to play it regardless. See Kurai’s Mbira performance [here](#).

### 1.1.3 Dr. Kólá Abímbólá: Ifá Priest, Philosopher

#### Howard University

*“Let us close our eyes and pretend to be dead. Then, we will know who loves us the most. Don’t you know that the ones who love is the most are the ones who are going to sympathize with us?”* **Dr. Kólá.**

Dr. Kólá spoke about Òrìṣa Epistemology and Ife as the GPS of life both of which he referred to as the “world’s best kept secret.” Ifá are the sacred texts of Òrìṣa religion and all its denominations around the world. Practitioners draw from this well of knowledge and use it a GPS to life. Each one of us has personal Òrìṣa or God or Ori which is symbolized by the physical head. Ori is about material success, it is your guide to progress and survival in the natural realm. This religion and way of life is practiced by close to 600 Million people. It is used by people in Nigeria, Togo, Ghana Sierra Leone, South Africa, all the Caribbean islands, Japan, Australia, USA , South American countries, Estonia and all of Europe. The distribution of this religion around the world can be attributed to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Yoruba people formed the largest group (70-90%) of the enslaved. Òrìṣa is the largest indigenous African religion surviving outside of Africa. However, the religion remains widely unknown or misunderstood because scholars who have studied it use “self-generated blinkers to cover their own eyes”. When they see patterns they still emphasize the difference, just like you have so many Christian denominations. That is how African religions have been studied. Òrìṣa is a guide to life. It comprises of 256 books each of which is made up of 800 poems. Priests and priestesses have to master these and use them to guide those who consult them in navigating human relationships. Dr. Kólá punctuated his presentation with stories to illustrate the key facets of Òrìṣa way of life. For instance, when someone important dies the master carver will carve a life size image of the person, and the family will dance around the town with this carving, to celebrate the fact that this person has gone on to become an ancestor. This world is a combination of the natural and super-natural worlds which share the same cosmos in Òrìṣa epistemology. Death is a transformation to becoming an ancestor. The Ifá spiritual practice is anchored on divination, sacrifices and incantations. It also involves confessions and offerings which can be either in the form of food or livestock. Ifá is also tied to the creation of law and order in society. It is a legal system generally thought of as a religion. Indigenous law is not fixated on criminal law as is the case in western legal system. This fixation ignores the fact that only about 5% are criminal cases. Most of the other cases are related to family life, interpersonal disputes, and other forms of socially oriented scenarios. Indigenous law is becoming an important system with which people guide their lives. This calls for us to pay serious attention to indigenous law systems such as Ifá which is really is a body of knowledge comprising of history, philosophy, medicine, law, music etc. It is recognized by [UNESCO](#) as a

masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity hence making it one of the most important bastions of indigenous knowledge in the world. To sum it up Dr. Kólá says:

*“When you go to a master diviner, there is only one thing you can expect. Ifá will help you in navigating the nooks, and problems of this world in such a way that Ifá is better than magic!”*

Read more about Ifá university [here](#).

**Dr. Kofi Gbolonyo: Musician, Professor of African studies and ethnomusicology**

**University of British Columbia**

*“If Africans do not have a conception of God, then they should not be able to pray.” Dr. Kofi Gbolonyo*

Dr. Gbolonyo spoke about Ewe cosmology and illustrated this through music. The Ewe people of west Africa understand life through the concept of triality. Ewe terms for the three stages or planes of existence of the individual reveals a clear philosophical conception that underscores Ewe beliefs. Creation as the origin of life, life on earth as transitory and terminal – hell, of life after death as eternal permanent and everlasting. According to the Ewe, hell is here on earth because this is where we struggle the most. Eternity on the other hand is where you transition to and stay after death. When you come to life you make a vow of what you are going to do. If you die before fulfilling your vow, you will be born again but with an identifying marker, so that those that may be living will know that you are back. This is reincarnation. Those who reincarnate are those who have not finished what they promised to do on earth. Most of the monotheistic faiths and African indigenous religions conceptualize God as male but to the Ewe God is both male and female and they invoke God that way. When the Ewes invoke God they say “God the male and female, the omniscient, that which has created the hand and created the feet.” The Ewe believe that life comes through the female. The most important component of God is therefore female. God is manifested in the earth from which all of life is derived/grows. Earth is therefore our mother on which we walk. The female principle of God characterized by: harmony, peace, care, joy, freshness, benevolent, and provident. The male principle is understood as: power, labour, strength, toughness, steadfastness, pain, suffering, security, protection, destruction and stern dispenser of justice. The Principle of law which is the third force (hence the triality) is seen as: power and unity of life, the great spirit of the universe, impersonal law, and the determiner of the destinies of human beings. The potency of the female shines through Ewe environmental consciousness because it is believed that the only plants that bear fruits are the female ones. Triality is also manifested in the practice of libation. Characterized by the use of your voice, pouring of water, and projecting your voice. In the

pouring of libations the physical connects with the metaphysical through the use of three components (water, flour, and liquor). Water is the essence of life, flour represents nourishment and liquor represents the opposite of life. Three people are involved in libation- the person who speaks, the one who provides the water and one who provides liquor. A Libation conducted in three sets. The invocation of the metaphysical, the petition, and calling for peace and prosperity. Further, the speaker gestures towards three directions – the sunrise, when the sun is overhead and sunset. To reinforce the importance of females the master drummer and the lead singers bear female markers in ewe language despite the fact these positions could be held by men.

#### **1.1.4 Dr. Gloria Emeagwali: AIK Scholar, Historian**

##### **Central Connecticut State University**

*“There is a restorative, healing, decolonizing, and empowerment aspect to African Indigenous Knowledge that should not be ignored” Dr. Gloria Emeagwali.*

Dr. Emeagwali highlighted the importance of African Indigenous and endogenous knowledge systems, the struggle to restore African dignity, and some of most recent discoveries in this realm of knowledge. Indigenous and or Endogenous are based on the fact that this knowledge is coming from the society, and is self-generating information. It is knowledge that is associated with history, interconnections, heritage, interrelations of body and mind, past and present. It encompasses and accumulated body of knowledge, epistemologies, and paradigms in an interdisciplinary framework. Devaluation of these knowledge systems can be seen through amongst others the undermining, ridicule, and trivializing of African anti-colonial resistance. Who/what are the enemies of AIK? Intuitional racism buttressed by white supremacist paradigms, erroneous intellectual genetically derived theories, intellectual deficit theories, unjust economic systems that have created hierarchies in the world, and Islamic and Christian fundamentalism. These interlocking forces continue to play a big role in undermining the integrity of AIK. The process of de- Africanization is clearly seen in recent the case in Mali where Islamic fundamentalisms tried to drive out all expressions of music and dance hence undermining the fabric of society. The academy is no friend of AIK either. There has been a continued and deliberate strategy of undermining African achievements and contribution to knowledge production by withholding information – “the intellectual game of hide and seek”, Dr. Emeagwali calls it. To get a full picture of AIK and its contributions you have to become a “library rat”. This entails digging out information from all the various scattered sources, and piecing together a coherent story. The goal of the “hide and seek” strategy is to perpetuate the myth of perpetual underachievement of African peoples, and to reproduce hierarchical structures. Indeed, “a narcissistic hegemon will always make itself as the only purveyor of religious, cultural, intellectual achievement.” There is a great need to decolonize teaching

methods and pedagogy. It should also be understood that indigenous knowledge shows up in diverse regions of the world in fields that include, physics, maths, chemistry, medicine, and in a holistic context where body and mind intersect. It should not be therefore treated as a relic of the past that is only visible in religious practices. It is about the past, today, and tomorrow as well. Decolonizing knowledge means “revisiting and reviving appropriate epistemologies, and unveiling Eurocentric propaganda masquerading as knowledge.” Some of the most phenomenal discoveries in the last 20 years have been linked to AIK. For instance, 100,000 Blombos engravings in South Africa representing the earliest geometrics as well as the earliest evidence of chemistry (mixing of iron oxide and oils), and Malian pottery that is 11,400 years older than Egyptian and Nubian pots. Other discoveries can be seen in the fields of metallurgy, and building technologies. These discoveries only get published in specialized journals and hence a majority of the people do not get to hear about them. The diminishing of African achievements and AIK calls for us to be vigilant and to strategically mobilize, and organize towards restoration of African dignity and pride. Aluta continua. The struggle continues.

### **1.1.5 Gloria Kendi Borona: PhD Candidate**

#### **Faculty of Forestry, University of British Columbia**

*“For me, engaging with indigenous knowledge systems is a struggle against forgetting, a struggle against forgetting that has enveloped the African continent, a struggle against forgetting that has been institutionalized in the quest for development and modernity. It is a struggle in terms of memorializing the landscape, and putting people back in their landscapes because conservation has also been very hostile to communities ... it is also a struggle to memorialize and immortalize this struggle that the Mau Mau stood for ...a quest for justice and freedom” Gloria Kendi Borona.*

Gloria chronicled the birth of British colonialism in Kenya the impact of colonization on African livelihoods and personhood, and African agency in fighting against oppression through the lens of forest and landscapes. Indigenous Knowledge was instrumental in launching the struggle against imperialism all over Africa. In Kenya, this is exemplified through the case of the Mau Mau who launched one of the most protracted battles for self-determination in the British Empire. Kenya was a British settler colony from 1895-1965. At the cornerstone of the colonial policy was alienation of land for white settlers. This resulted to lots of land losses to local people and the subsequent enslavement of the same local people on settler farms, which were now named “white highlands.” This was the most agriculturally productive land and also situated in the best climatic zones, areas that were not too hot nor too cold. Local communities resisted imperialism from the outset but they were subdued by the superiority of British weaponry, divide and rule tactics, and ecological devastations through drought and diseases. Decades of disgruntlement with colonial oppressive policies spawned the Mau Mau. At the core

of Mau Mau ideals was the struggle to restore lost land and to regain self-rule. When the Mau Mau war broke out the guerillas retreated to key mountainous and forested landscapes such as the Nyandarwa, Mount Kenya and Nyambene. The communities turned to their traditions and knowledge systems in order to wage war against an enemy who was armed a million times more than they. Key of these knowledge systems was the use of oaths to consolidate solidarity. The oath was widely administered using products of the land, and galvanized support among large masses of the population (in an out of the forest). Those in the forest comprised the militant wing and those that were outside were the Mau Mau passive wing. The colonial government declared a state of emergency in 1952 opening up the land and people to an all-out war. Massive torture was meted to the African population for demanding for their freedom. This torture was the subject of a case launched by the Mau Mau against the British for which they received compensation and an apology. It should be noted that this case went on for over a decade and was unlocked by amongst others robust academic historical research. The use of indigenous knowledge in the mountains was manifested through a mastery of the landscape for military combat, strategies to store and mobilize food, communication methods that employed the use of trees as post offices, connections with the divine through sacred trees, and production and use of medicines. This use of forests during the struggle for independence shows us that there are deeper cultural and historical attachments to forests for communities beyond just provision of things like water, firewood, etc. Numerous Mau Mau injustices remain unresolved (such as the death and burial of Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi) but this movement continues to be an inspiration to all the warriors of justice all over the world.

#### **1.1.6 Dr. Wade Davis: Explorer, Writer, Professor**

##### **Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia**

*“Haiti became a thorn on the side of the imperial age. It is an amazing expression of African reality. It should be proclaimed by history” Dr. Wade Davis.*

Dr. Davis made a case for respect for cultural diversity and expressions of humanity. One of the greatest revelations of the world of Anthropology is the realization that the world in which one is born, does not exist in some absolute sense but is just one model of reality. The cultural diversity of the world teaches us that there are other ways of being, other ways of thinking, other ways of performing life in each society’s social, cultural and ecological space. This is an idea that can only fill us with hope, Wade says. The central Anthropological revelation in our time is that race is utter fiction. That, the genetic endowment of humanity is a continuum. Thus, all of humanity, in essence, shares the same intellectual potential and capacity. How, this capacity is manifested in cultures is simply a matter of cultural orientation. At the crux of each cultural tradition is the question of what does it mean to be human and alive. The answer to this question comes forth through all the 7,000 different languages of the world. Yet, over half



of these languages are not being taught or used. They have been silenced and are fading away carrying with them all the diverse ways of knowing related to the earth and the cosmos. These languages are diminished by amongst others English hegemony. While cultural relativism is acknowledged in Anthropology the discipline does not call for an endorsement of cultural practices that entrench injustice. Instead, it provides room to make more informed judgements. Anthropology can be a useful tool in shining light and enhancing understanding of marginalization of cultural practices. A good example of this is seen through Vodou religion. Wade stressed that Vodou is not a black magic cult, but rather a religion that just like any other, tries to make sense of the mysteries of life. Further, Vodou gives its acolytes access to the divine making it a most democratic form of religion. But, how and why did Vodou get such a negative connotation? The answer can be found in Haiti. Haiti under French colonialism was extremely important to the Imperial economy. It produced 2/3 of the world's coffee, 163 million pounds of sugar annually, 4,000 ships sailed between Haiti and France; 5 million French citizens depended on this trade for their economic well-being. The wealth emanating from Haiti was generated by 500,000 African slaves. Haiti gained its independence in 1804 after a slave revolt. Other imperial powers tried to retake Haiti unsuccessfully but the Haitians fought so ferociously and defeated each one of them; the best of these defeats is exemplified by the annihilation of Napoleon's army. The US Marine Corps occupation of Haiti in the 1920's yielded all manner of books that portrayed Vodou and Haitians in the most grotesque manner possible. Hollywood movies were then produced out of these books in the 1940's further cementing the negative perception about Vodou all over the world. Haiti's isolation has resulted in the preservation of cultural traditions that may have been weakened by the colonial incursion in Africa. The story of Haiti and all other indigenous ways of knowing reinforce this message - *"each culture deserves to have a voice and to be heard, not just to be recorded by history, but to be proclaimed by history."*