

# African Indigenous Knowledge explores the meaning behind Indigeneity

Indigenous peoples and cultures around the world have had a difficult history characterized mostly by marginalization and oppression. There is still effort required to reconcile indigenous people and educate people on its relevance.

The beginning of the new academic year saw UBC host the first African Indigenous Knowledge symposium, a two-day event exploring the definition, discourse and complexity of indigeneity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through a predominantly African perspective.

“The term “indigenous” carries a lot of power, complexity, and history. It also generates confusion, for who is considered indigenous and who decides this inclusion,” said Curtis Andrews, the organizer of the symposium and a graduate student at the UBC School of Music.

These were the opening lines for the event that would challenge the modern presumptions regarding indigeneity as a culture, knowledge system and lifestyle still practiced today.

The symposium began with a panel discussion by experienced scholars and practitioners of indigenous knowledge. Among those present were Dr Sheryl Lightfoot, the Canada Research Chair in Global Indigenous Rights, Dr Mark Turin, the Co-Chair for the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies at UBC and Dr Gloria Emeagwali, Professor of History and African Studies at the Central Connecticut State University (CCSU).

The panel took a critical approach to the definition and distinction of the terms indigenous and indigeneity, a discussion often accompanied with the concept of colonization. The discussion further explored time, place, migration and religion within the scope of Indigenous knowledge as more than just a identity.

It was indeed a lively exchange of ideas which paved way for the next event the following day, which was largely characterized by presentations of research work, the traditional practice of honouring ancestors through libation, traditional Zimbabwean music and an interactive dance session where audiences had the chance to indulge in traditional Ewe music and dance performances.

The event was received cordially by the UBC community, ending with a lavish Ghanaian-style dinner to commemorate the successful event, courtesy of *Taste of*

*Africa*. The event organizers want to acknowledge that the event was hosted on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam people

# A Summary of the Panel Discussion

The panel discussion that took place on September 9, 2016 was facilitated by Curtis Andrews, who opened the event. The discussion addressed the contentious definition and identification of indigenous people. In attendance were: **Dr Sheryl Lightfoot**, the Canada Research Chair in Global Indigenous Rights, **Dr Kofi Gbolonyo**, musician and instructor of African Studies and ethnomusicology at UBC, **Dr Kola Abimbola**, Ifa Priest and Philosopher at Howard University, **Dr Mark Turin**, the Co-Chair for the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies at UBC, **Dr Gloria Emeagwali**, Professor of History and African Studies at the Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) and **Gloria Kendi Borona**, Phd Candidate in the Department of Forestry at UBC.

The discussion was opened by Curtis Andrews, the facilitator of the event, who prompted the question: “It must be asked where the line between what and who is indigenous is drawn. In the Canadian landscape this distinction is evident, but what about the African case? What are the shared struggles, histories and futures of this global indigenous identity?”

- Dr. Lightfoot started the discussion by debriefing the origins of the term ‘Indigenous’, which she states was started by native North American activists who defined a broad term to encompass their diversity and complexity, a term which would also come to be used by Aborigines in Australia and New Zealand, as well as other indigenous groups whose identity beforehand was a western simplification of their identity, to terms like “Indian” or “Indo” in Latin America.

Lightfoot also mentions her book *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution*.

“[*Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution*] traces some of the beginnings of the indigenous rights movement, the emergence of the declaration on the rights of indigenous people and goes through all the various debates and contestations... in the history [of indigenous rights],” said Lightfoot. “It also looks at what do indigenous rights mean for all of us as a global community and what sort of changes are involved.”

- Gloria Kendi Borona continued to expound on Lightfoot’s idea, albeit from a different perspective on how the term ‘indigenous’ was defined.

“I had concluded that the issue of indigeneity in Africa was just an academic discussion and an attempt to pound African peoples into categories into which they didn’t belong,” said Borona.

Borona went further to mention the relevance of major institutions, such as the World Bank, in the definition of the term indigenous and what consequences it may. Borona drew on the example of the World Bank instructing Kenya Power, the main electricity provider in Kenya, to prioritize indigenous communities, namely pastoralists and hunter-gatherer societies, over everybody else.

Borona ascertained that doing so would only contribute to further marginalization.

“We have to redefine this notion of indigeneity and we want to present it as marginalization and explain that marginalization is manifested in different ways in different societies, including those that are considered the 'dominant society'.”

- Dr. Gloria Emeagwali, gave her opinion from a historian’s perspective which she claims is more than definition, but also an implication.

“As a historian, focusing on the forces that bind together knowledge systems - not just the supernatural - we're looking at a whole world view. We're looking at the whole question of continued innovation. We're looking at the whole question of the very careful and well established success- to a large extent - of peoples in Africa, to cope with their environment and develop alternative epistemologies; to develop alternative perceptions and challenge, indirectly, the Eurocentric dominance,” said Emeagwali.

“Indigenous Knowledge in this sense, or endogenous knowledge, has revealed itself in many ways - in terms of science and a holistic context.”

- Dr. Kofi Gbolonyo asserts that indigeneity and indigenous peoples cannot be discussed outside the context of colonials and the implications of colonialism. He makes note that his personal use of the term is not within a political context, but as a knowledge systems preceding the advent of colonialism, and one which is still practiced today.

“If we take out colonialism, the concept of indigenous is redundant and has no currency. So the only reason why the concept, or whatever it is we call indigeneity today, is the fact that we as a human race have had his experience of colonialism, without which we wouldn't be sitting here talking about who is indigenous and who is not,” said Gbolonyo.

Gbolonyo continues to say that the concept of indigeneity is rooted in societies and nations where colonialists settled and brought about contests in identity for the natives living there. This identification would help the natives assert their rights and other matters of value to them preserved.

“If colonialism is the key event, word or act that procreated what we now call indigeneity, then that becomes very important for us to look at, especially when looking at Africa. [In West Africa] the colonialists never stayed or they died. So there was no need to distinguish ourselves from any other person.”

- Dr. Kola Abimbola, an Ifa priest, detailed indigeneity as a way of life, rather than a political or theoretical framework of discussion.

“For many people, what it means to be an indigene is to live your life, govern your life, rule the manner in which you think and relate with other people on the basis of principles of the organization of conduct that are entrenched in the body of knowledge we believe to be in existence since the beginning of time.”

Abimbola explained that the Transatlantic Slave Trade created a large diaspora of Orisha practitioners in the New World. He claims about 55 million people in Brazil, 10 million in the United States and approximately 200 million worldwide practice Orisha religion as a lifestyle.

“At heart, Orisha culture is really a method of negotiating inter-personal human relationships at a civil and societal level. “

He goes further to mention that the process of indigeneity can occur in 3 ways – by birth, prescription or by choice.

- Dr. Mark Turin offered insight by responding to Lightfoot and Borona’s ideas, while taking note that he was a non-indigenous persons contributing to the discussion.

Turin expanded on Lightfoot’s ideas on the definition of indigenous, noting that while states sought to confine the definition, indigenous peoples opted to leave it a broad definition. Turin further tied this idea to Borona’s example of Kenya, saying that perhaps many Africans would have a difficult time ‘ticking that box [as indigenous]’.

“The state that has a stake in widening the definition so that more of its own citizens, also increasingly the elites, claim access to the very tools of indigeneity previously restricted to communities who felt marginalized,” said Turin.