



ROUNDTABLE

Theorizing Africana Religions: A Journal of Africana Religions Inaugural Symposium

CONTRIBUTORS

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Abstract

These edited proceedings of a 2013 symposium at Northwestern University are organized around the question of how to theorize the study of Africana religions across wide expanses of time and space. An international body of scholars representing the fields of history, religious studies, anthropology, American studies, sociology, African studies, classics, and African American studies gathered in a two-day event to consider the past, present, and future of their shared commitment to understanding the religions of African and African-descended people. Scholars discuss the challenges of and opportunities for the study of Africana religions from ancient to modern times, across Africa and its diaspora.

Introduction

On March 8 and 9, 2013, we gathered historians, religious studies scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, classicists, literature scholars, and other scholars—students of different time periods and different regions, countries, and continents—to mark the publication of the first issue of the *Journal of Africana*

Religions. The purpose was not only to celebrate the publication of the journal's first issue but also to think together about what the journal could become. Most importantly, we hoped to realize, even to model, the vision of the journal, which is predicated on the idea that the humanities, arts, and social sciences are made richer, more accurate, and more useful when all those who study Africana religions speak and listen to one another across boundaries of discipline, time, and space.

The weekend began with a Friday keynote by Sylviane Diouf of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Diouf presented an overview of diasporic Muslims in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Her comparative approach to the religious practices of African-descended Muslims raised a question that was asked throughout our panel discussions on Saturday: just how representative are African diasporic Muslims of Africana diaspora experience more generally? In answering that question, her keynote beckoned us to look beyond the Black Atlantic toward Asia, as we seek to understand the religious cultures of African-descended people.

Saturday's three panels began with a discussion about the geography of Africana religions called "Mapping Africana Religions." We asked all three panelists to answer the following question: "Where do we find Africana religions?" We also encouraged them to consider the categories of transnationalism, diaspora, and globalization in their responses. Panelists included Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, an anthropologist of African American Islam in the United States and an assistant professor at Purdue University; Yvonne Chireau, a professor of religion at Swarthmore College and scholar of African American religious history, African American conjuring traditions, and Black Judaism; and Paul Christopher Johnson, director of the anthropology and history graduate program at the University of Michigan and a scholar of African diasporic religions in the Caribbean and Brazil. The moderator for the session was Nitasha Sharma, an associate professor of African American studies and Asian American studies at Northwestern University.

While the first panel of the day was concerned mainly with space, the second panel, "Africana Temporalities and Methods," focused on time. This afternoon session followed a lunchtime plenary address by Charles H. Long, who offered a formal response to each of the articles in the journal's first issue. Northwestern University's Sherwin Bryant, an associate professor of African American studies and history, then moderated a conversation on the challenge of studying Africana religions in and across ancient, medieval, and modern historical periods with Gay Byron, associate dean and a professor

of New Testament at the Howard University School of Divinity, and Paul Lovejoy, a distinguished research professor in history at York University. Long remained at the dais to participate in the Q&A session, which featured a series of very lively exchanges with the audience. The last session of the day, which was largely an open conversation among everyone in the room, included a response to the day's idea making by Kathryn Lofton, Sarai Ribicoff Associate Professor of Religious Studies and American Studies at Yale University.

The edited version of our discussions presented here exemplifies the spirit of inquiry at the heart of the journal's mission. One of its themes is a creative anxiety about the journal's quest to understand Africana religions as transspatial and transtemporal phenomena. What is gained and what is lost when we constitute a field that includes phenomena as diverse as the role of Africans in early Christianity, the spread of Islam to the New World in the age of European colonial domination, and the emergence of Orisha-centered religious practices as a world religion? In trying to answer such questions, we devoted a lot of time to asking one another about the ethics and politics of the Africana purview. Many of our conversations, perhaps predictably, turned toward questions about how we should define the words "religion" and "Africana." Even if this rigorous intellectual parsing was to be expected, it did not feel tired. Perhaps the presence of so many disciplines and so many different voices—students not only of different religious traditions but also of different epochs and places—made the conversations feel fresh and vital. It was clear at the conclusion of the symposium that defining the basic terms and scope of the field will constitute an important function of our collective endeavor for some time to come. There was also a sense among many, if not most of us—but certainly not all—that we were becoming part of a collective endeavor. Our shared commitments to speaking with one another did not yield concrete transdisciplinary research agendas—it was too soon for that. Instead, it became clear that the journal's charge is to cultivate such agendas, lines of inquiry, and scholarly debates over a period of years.

In rendering a coherent portrait of the day's conversations, we have selectively reproduced and stylistically edited the remarks of panelists and certain follow-up questions and answers. The proceedings below are not transcripts. We have not been able to include everyone's questions and everyone's answers, so this edited version does not capture the sometimes spontaneous, humorous, and insightful give-and-take that occurred. Nor does it give a sense of how many undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty participated in the

conversations. What it does, instead, is suggest the possible discoveries that can be pursued when we make intellectual space for so many different kinds of scholars studying so many different topics related to Africana religions.

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Edward E. Curtis and Sylvester A. Johnson



Mapping Africana Religions: Transnationalism, Globalization, and Diaspora

SU'AD ABDUL KHABEER, *Purdue University*

I teach a course called Anthropology and Blackness that begins with a question: what does it mean to be Black / African-descended in the Western hemisphere? During this course, we examine how anthropology as a discipline has been defined by this question and we explore the ways anthropologists, Black peoples who are not anthropologists, and others have tackled issues of Blackness, which I define to include the histories, traditions, and customs of Black people as well as the circulation of ideas and beliefs about people of African descent. Yet in looking at the relationship between anthropology and blackness, we arrive at another and more fundamental question about the nature of humanity—basically, who counts as a human? And we do so because this question has animated how Africana peoples have been studied and dominated and have deployed their own creative agency and genius. And so I believe the same kind of logic applies when we examine transnationalism, diaspora, and globalization in relation to the study of Africana religions. Studying these phenomena promises to advance our collective understanding of the broader human experience.

When using Africana peoples generally and Africana religions in particular as a starting point, one of the primary conclusions we come to is that today's diasporas and transnationalisms are not drastically new departures from past human movement across time and space, and critically, the meanings humans have given to these migrations are not new either. In my own work, which includes a focus on African American Muslims in the United States, I'm always struck by the ways African American Muslim communities across ideology, doctrine, and politics articulate the Black Muslim soul as a transnational subjectivity. And by way of diasporic consciousness, they construct religious genealogies and discursive traditions to and through Africa that labor through a shrewd mix of grace and faith to affirm and reimagine their identity as Black American Muslims. I want to briefly illustrate this point by quoting one of my interlocutors, Luqman, who in the course of a conversation on hip-hop in the American Muslim community narrated for me a discursive tradition around Africana peoples and music that began around the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and so I'm quoting, "*Salla allayhi wa salam* [peace and blessings be upon the] Prophet Muhammad, [who] had our Mother Aisha, who was his wife, against his shoulder and he was watching the Ethiopians coming into the masjid [the mosque] and whatnot, dancing and whatnot. I kind of envision reggae pumping. I envision our people getting down with drums, singing. And Prophet Muhammad, he's like, 'Yo, these cats, this is what they do,' you know what I mean? And so that I think right there, this is what I envision happening." And so in relating this vision, or his vision, of that moment in prophetic history, Luqman pictures the energy and style of contemporary Black expressive cultures as being justified as well as being continental and diasporic. In drawing these links across time and space, he is enacting a contemporary intervention because these sonic linkages supported by diasporic consciousness are offered to articulate African American Muslims as descended from the Muslim and African past. This anchors Black Muslims in traditions, spiritual and otherwise, that are comparable to both the dominant Euro-American genealogical narrative as well as the origin stories narrated by U.S. Muslims with roots in the "Muslim world."

Thus, as illustrated, this labor locates Africana peoples and times and spaces in ways that explode the narrow horizon provided by white supremacy as well as nonwhite hegemonies. And although this interview took place in the twenty-first century, the narrative construction that Luqman employs is much older and, importantly, came to be long before the Western scholarly tradition

was able to come to terms with the world as interconnected. So I find this kind of orientation particularly critical, especially when regarding Africana peoples, because their cultures are often, even to this day, bracketed off as particularly or peculiarly singular in a way that reinforces older epistemologies that question or deny their or our humanity.

I also believe that it is through the serious engagement of transnationalism, diaspora, and globalization that scholars can be attentive to and hence avoid too often repeated scholarly missteps, namely the privileging of Christianity and the reproduction of U.S. exceptionalism in the methodologies and theoretical frameworks in which Africana religions are studied. There is a problematic trend in the scholarship that privileges Christianity as the foundational experience of Africana religion and diaspora. And as such, the theological orientation, historical events, priorities, and practices of Protestant Christianity as a practice of Black peoples become the default, or proxy, for Black religiosity and thus the paradigm through which non-Christian Blacks are analyzed and interpreted, alternatively underestimated and ignored. Let me illustrate this point by referring to the really exciting, emerging body of scholarship on hip-hop and religion, an area that has been wanting for quite some time in hip-hop studies. While this is a very critical development, there is a conspicuous absence of any discussion on Islam in these studies, which I might mention is not the case in discussions of hip-hop outside the academy. This absence is striking for two reasons: firstly, because of the scholarly brilliance that the people who are leading this charge bring to the table and also, secondly, because of the historical facts. I use the word "facts" here deliberately because Islam's relevance to hip-hop's development is not some kind of obscurity that needs some interpretive gymnastics, but it is really apparent. And yet whereas more secularly oriented hip-hop scholars might frame, for example, the Last Poets, Malcolm X, and Minister Louis Farrakhan as sort of an iteration of Black nationalism devoid of any spirituality, in the religious studies conversation it only offers a sort of Christian spiritual frame, which truncates our analytical possibilities.

Take, for example, Kanye West's song "Jesus Walks." How do you engage a song like this, which although recorded under the name of Kanye West, who I believe is a Black Christian, was actually written by an emcee who is an African American convert to Islam, Rhymefest. And then the song was covered by another African American emcee, Lupe Fiasco, this time as "Muhammad Walks." And Lupe was raised a Muslim. How do we understand

the production of such music by African Americans with such diverse religious backgrounds? If we privilege Christianity, and that becomes our only frame, we miss the dynamic religious exchanges in African American culture.

To conclude, I want to address the question of American exceptionalism. Paying attention to it is important in order to resist the apparent hegemony of U.S. Black American culture. In many ways, we see the cultural flows between America and the rest of the world, as well as U.S. Blacks and the rest of the Africana world, as being unidirectional. And of course this is not the case. We can use hip-hop as an example. The origins of hip-hop were diasporic, and not simply North American. So it is important, so when we bring diaspora to the forefront we can avoid this narrow theoretical landscape. When I am thinking about keeping an eye on American exceptionalism, I am also suggesting that we need to keep an eye on power and how it may function in the study of Africana religions.

So the question that I have this: what is the relationship between Black Americans and America, not as exceptional but as empire? This is something that I find myself increasingly interested in as African American Muslims, much like twentieth-century jazz ambassadors, are participating in cultural diplomacy efforts and this time not in the Soviet bloc but in Muslim-majority nations. They are bringing “Muslim hip-hop” to Muslims. And this could be seen as potentially cooperating with empire in light of how the United States is wielding its imperial power in these same places. Yet, like the jazz ambassadors, these Muslim hip-hop artists are also motivated by domestic concerns and by their locations and experiences as religious and racial minorities. To further complicate the picture, their performances and interactions with their Muslim hosts may destabilize the kind of antiblack racism and the dismissal of African Islamic traditions that you find not just in the United States but around the world. In sum, studying the circulation of Africana religions also requires us to look at the impact of and responses to American exceptionalism and U.S. empire among African American and other African-descended religious practitioners.

YVONNE CHIREAU, *Swarthmore College*

Our mission this weekend is to inaugurate some new research agendas in the study of Africana religions, to explore, to engage, to wrestle with the intellectual formulations of our scholarship, to debate and define theoretical trends,

and to emerge as enlightened scholars ready to apply our knowledge to the most significant of concerns and questions, all with the intention of revitalizing Africana studies in religion. In the spirit of rigorous exegesis, let me start with the first notion, the notion of mapping the Africana religions. Now I don't know about anyone else, but as a religion person, I react most predictably to this term. It takes me to the mapping idea laid out by the esteemed historian of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith, who, quoting Alfred Korzybski, stated that "map is not territory, but maps are all we possess" in a wide-ranging inaugural lecture as the William Benton Professor at the University of Chicago in 1974 and later in a concluding essay in a book called *Map Is Not Territory*. Even though I admit I have not kept up with all of the most current academic literature over the years, and I'm sure that more than a few scholars in Africana religion have engaged the mapping rubric first proposed by Smith, our professor, Charles H. Long, was one of the first to insist that methodological limitations in the study of African American religions should force us to reexamine what he called the "creative possibilities of Black religion" and that the true academic study of religion requires a focused theoretical and historical analysis of its objects such as myth, ritual, and human experiences of the sacred—analysis that can be accomplished through the use of mapping strategies.

Without going into a lengthy discussion of Smith's thesis, I would say that I find his assertion that the study of religion requires a clear, self-conscious recognition of the boundaries between religion as the object and religion as the subject of study to be extremely useful as we reconsider our own roles and placement in the discourses of Africana religions. Smith understood the mapping process as securing not so much a safe place for the historian to stand and orient herself, nor as a way to chart an orderly path along the scenes of a generative chaos that could at any time erupt into placeless utopian terrain, but rather as a way of embracing an awareness of the contingency of both order and disorder. We may have to become "initiated," he said, "by the other whom we study and undergo the ordeal of incongruity." Now, some of us will find this language striking, recognizing in this statement that most central of institutions in the African and African-based religions, that is, the process of sacred transformation of the human person in initiation. But what I really find suggestive in Smith's discussion of all this mapping, constructing, and inhabiting that goes on in religions as well as in the study of religion is the contrast that he offers to our notions of mapping as an orienting endeavor, a perspective that appears to eschew safety, order, and the constraining fit

between map and territory in favor of disjunction, oscillation, and instability. So instead of a map with strict boundaries, rigid, fixed demarcations, Smith gives us movement without resolution, antistructure, incongruity, and paradox. “We may have to relax some of our cherished notions of significance and seriousness,” he says, “for we have often missed what is humane in the other by the seriousness of our quest.” And here is the money quote, where he is refining this idea: “Some religions delight in a lack of fit or incongruity.”

Delight. What a word, what a concept. So instead of the terror of chaos being overcome with a map that provides us with order by fixing our location, we have the messiness of lack of fit. We have possibilities for transcendence and play, delight, frivolity. So this sounds to me like so much jazz, I mean jazz, improvisation, musical signifying, contingency, bebop, delight in the movement, departure from sequence, leap away from linearity, playful disturbance, to jump from order to disorder and returning again, the rhythm, the dance of the trickster until one enters what Sam Gill, a scholar of Native American religions, has called the “freedom of play.” Imagine that. Play for Gill is intentionally embodying the tension between doing religion and the study thereof, and acknowledging the absurdity of the process.

I would ask you: what could be more African in some essentialized sense than a perspective that privileges self-aware play as an aesthetic that might govern the very serious work of mapping religion, which in itself might be perceived as an activity that is fruitless? So I just want to throw out that when we unpack this idea of the Africana religion scholar’s work of mapmaking and mapping, which was influenced by Smith, that we are not trapped by the idea of mapping as a process that predetermines our arrival at some final, set place; instead, we might emphasize the endless movement of experimentation, and we might even have some fun, for God’s sake.

I now want to shift this discussion and speak about what I like—speak about magic and think about some areas where I think there could be some fertile directions for us to consider. We know that the category of magic, like religion, is the invention of those who have the power to make it. So we, the collective of Africana religion scholars and academics, we own it. And my specific concern, my interest, is with the forms, functions, and meanings of a complex of ideas and traditions known in Black American culture as hoodoo. The study of hoodoo, or, as it has been called, conjure, has evolved over the years from the ethnologies of Southern folklorists from the nineteenth century to the pioneering research of Albert Raboteau on folk beliefs in the slave

community to the most recent work on gender and the trope of the conjure woman in art and film. Academics have paid attention to the ways that hoodoo and conjure have been created, appropriated, commodified, and consumed by practitioners, culture producers, and spiritual merchandisers in a vast network that replicates the pull and flow of Africana religious life generally in transnational formats, in diaspora, within institutions, within a wide-ranging transit of ideas, personnel, products, and literature. Today its influence is spread far and wide by digital and electronic means, even returning to Africa in a powerful generative loop. Some studies have given primacy to the issue of provenance and origins, while others consider conjure's expression within religious formations. As Jacob Dorman has most recently shown, some of the most flexible articulations of conjure occur in religious sources as diverse as Black Judaism, Rastafarianism, and African American Islam.

But what I want to talk about with this magic of Black folk, whether it is organized in its therapeutic dimensions, in healing, divination, root working, charms, or around insurgent activities, such as harming, fixing, aggressive sorcery, or self-defense, is the issue of efficacy. The most common question I get asked when I leave my house is "Does it work? Does that stuff work? Does it work?" It is not a question that the religion scholar should or can easily dodge. And how would we know if it worked anyway? How could we say that it worked? Putting aside for a moment that there is a real irony in the query that glosses over the many meanings of the word "work" in the Afro-Atlantic spiritual vernacular, I have to admit that it I have never been able to engage this notion of efficacy within the discourses that are available in our academic system.

"How's that working for you?" I wonder about the limit of materialist and historicist methodologies and the way that we sometimes as religion scholars overemphasize rationality as we strive to understand questions of efficacy. And this pertains to magic as well as religion. So, how does one answer this question? How do we employ modes of interpretation that are explicitly embedded in the traditions from which these remarkable activities emerged? Endogenous beliefs, structures of consciousness, imaginative expressions such as those who were going to the conjurer who creates the mysteries, the hoodoo who manipulates the discourses of power, the root worker who engages nature's most primal and elemental intelligences—does their map demand a kind of primacy in our analysis? If we were to ask "does it work?" for the things we study, how might we take into account the depth and the reality of the experience from where we stand as outsiders looking in and understand that magic does indeed

work within a world in which it is internally consistent with a kind of knowing that we as scholars may or may not possess.

One possible methodology is offered in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Africana Religions* by Tracey Hucks and Dianne Diakité, who in their essay “Africana Religious Studies” challenge Africana religionists’ neglect of what they characterize as phenomenological aspects, all too often in favor of theological or multidisciplinary methodologies. In this article, they argue that there appears to be a structural problem in the work of Africana religionists in that historians, theologians, sociologists, and others have neglected phenomenological description when analyzing Black religious experience. They call for a renewed emphasis on phenomenology, noting that phenomenological questions can serve to “reorient our studies of Black religious subjects in order to address aspects of their humanity, orientation, and imagination that registers subtler dimensions of their conditions as human beings.” This is a worthwhile call to the study of religion in its most foundational sense, a focus on the ways that individuals and communities consciously and unconsciously exist and experience their humanity. In the study of the magical, the supernatural, the occult, the esoteric, and any of the other rubrics that constitute this contested realm of categories, phenomenological approaches might yield new and productive insights. Phenomenology might help us to see how *it* works, whatever it is. After all, hoodoo and conjure are explicitly about people creating and transforming, both materially and figuratively, the manufactured, the composite using an extraordinary idiom, the mojo bag, the love trick, the gambling hand, the charm, the fetish.

I hope that, as scholars, we are both serious enough and playful enough to take on these most profound and important questions. This is where many of us have started from. It is a journey that we have just begun, and it is unknown where our descriptive, analytical, and interpretative tasks of mapping or our mapmaking will end up.

PAUL CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON, *University of Michigan*

I would like to expand the question that we are trying to answer in this question from “where are Africana religions?” to “what, who, and how are Africana religions?” Starting with the where, the clichéd answer would be: they are everywhere. They are in the usual places, in the Americas, but there is a lot of literature now about Africana religions in Europe, Japan—in short, dispersed

across the globe. The question is, what is the nature of them everywhere? And here I think it is worth distinguishing between three of the key words thrown out: diaspora, transnational, and global. These are often freely substituted one for another but are worth keeping distinct.

Sometimes Africana religions are carriers of nation-states' identities across boundaries, and in this case transnational becomes a fitting description. For example, Garifuna practitioners in the Bronx may on occasion embrace a Honduran identity or a Guatemalan identity or a Belizean identity, which are nation-state identities. But often Africana religions are not transnational so much as extranational or supernational or nonnational. They militate against nation-state claims, and so it would be wise, I think, to pay attention to the ways that diasporic affiliations or global practices are not engaged with a nation-state, for that is their power.

Diaspora, too, has a particular history, and it is important to be clear that diaspora involves a kind of territorial identity. "Africana" is the word that has brought us together here, and this is a really interesting word because it is at once a territorial claim and it is also extremely expansive. But diasporic religious practices always have the question of a territory in mind. So I think it is important to retain the idea that diasporic practices exercise the power of territory at the same time as we expand what "territory" means.

Diaspora has two main lineages. One would be the notion of place-focused practices. The other is the notion of lateral diasporas, an idea that came into play with Paul Gilroy's work in 1993 and James Clifford's writing in 1994. We have this kind of tension within the notion of diaspora about whether it is best to think of lateral diasporas or place-focused ones. When does a so-called diasporic religion pass into something that can be called a world religion? This was a notion that I first remember coming out of Sandra Barnes's 1997 book called *Africa's Ogun*, where in her introduction she says that African diasporic religions are now world religions. They exist everywhere. But what does that mean?

It begs other questions, such as what kinds of Africana religions travel really successfully? Why is it that the Orisha form has been so wildly successful, taking hold everywhere in the world, and other kinds of Africana religions are less successful, are less appealing, are less marketable, are less fashionable, are less successful? Since many Africana religions don't have any central hierarchic structure, we have an important example of a world or a globalized

religion that has no centralized authorities. The fact that these religions are successful in traveling across the globe challenges the sociologist Max Weber's argument that if a religion is to survive, it has to be rationalized, bureaucratized, that you have to move from charisma to rationalization. One argument put forth by Kristina Wirtz in Cuba is that actually it is precisely the lack of a centralized authority that produces this discursive ferment, she calls it, about what is the tradition, what is the authentic, and that that brings richness and energy to Africana traditions.

And then there is global. Global implies something quite different. It implies simultaneity in time and space and gestures toward something different from either transnational or diasporic practices. Here we might think about the internet or online Africana religions. So, although Africana religions are everywhere, they are everywhere in different ways. I think it is useful to think about different ways to be everywhere and how those are sometimes a contradiction of each other and sometimes overlap.

In sum, my first recommendation is that we keep some analytical precision about those three words—transnational, diasporic, and global—and that we think about how they work differently and how sometimes they are dimensions of religious practice itself.

Now let me turn to the question “Who are Africana religions?” One of the interesting things is that sometimes, even often, Africana religions are being practiced by persons not of African descent. In an article I read recently by Clara Saraiva (“Afro-Brazilian Religions in Portugal”), she describes the contemporary practice of Brazilian Candomblé in Portugal, and she says it is all middle-class, white Portuguese practicing this religion. Afro-Brazilian immigrants to Portugal are all doing Pentecostalism; they are not interested at all in Candomblé.

This raises the question of whether Pentecostalism is an Africana religion. Given that William Seymour, a founding figure of Pentecostalism, was from Louisiana, it makes sense that he had some exposure to hoodoo and so on. I think we have not done enough work thinking about convergences between Pentecostal practices and other Africana traditions in terms of the role of ongoing revelation in Pentecostalism.

There is also a problem of nomenclature. Do we talk about religions of the Black Atlantic? Religions of the Afro-Atlantic? Afro-descendent? Afro-inspired? Africana? What is at stake in each of these terms? The Black Atlantic

may not be the best rubric, given that many people practicing Africana religions are not Black. Or at least it raises the question of how we should think about these religions and what it means to people who are not Black to be practicing religions related to African traditions. When a Portuguese person is possessed by an African king and talks about maintaining the tradition, what are they talking about? What is tradition for them? It is a placeholder for something, but it is not deep history. It is a sensibility of something. What are they seeking? What is the power of Africana for people who are not of African descent?

“How” are Africana religions? How do they thrive? How do they arrive in places? What are the carriers? What are the modes of transmission? What are the mediations? What are the ritual techniques, the technologies, the arts of appearance by which the gods of Africa are caused to appear and become manifest for the devotees? One of the commonly invoked ways is spirit possession. This has become a cliché since Herskovits; the constitutive factor, the common thing of all Africana religions is this idea of spirit possession. I’m really interested in spirit possession, but I also think we need to think more broadly within that realm. What other kind of technologies are manifesting? So, for example, among the Garifuna, it is not all about spirit possession; it is about long-term multiweek rituals that produce something like a tableau vivant of the tradition through practices, through fishing in the correct way, canoeing in the correct way, dressing in the correct way, dancing in the correct way. It produces an aesthetic over time that makes people feel the presence of the past in a way that takes a lot more choreography and energy and resources than does spirit possession, which has a directness and a focused quality.

When? When are Africana religions? What are the chronotopes? Often Africana religions are located in the past. Pentecostals understand religions like Santería or hoodoo and Candomblé as being part of the past and Pentecostalism as being about the future. They reinforce this opposition of pastness and futurity over and over. We want to look hard at that. Given that Africana religions perhaps do often value the past in discourse, practice, and tradition, what are the futurities, what are the futures being played out in different versions of the past as they are enacted? How is this chronotope of Africa in the past sometimes used against Africana religions, especially by Pentecostals?

There is also an interesting research question about mismatches between the imagined Africa and contemporary Africa. I think often people go to Africa looking for an Africana religion of the past and they find contemporary

Africa, and it does not fit at all with what their expectation was, and this can produce disappointment, learning, conflict, and contradiction. So some people are working on religious tourism, Africana religious tourism, which elevates certain sites to destinations, like Bahia, where people go on pilgrimages. There is an interesting question of pilgrimage and the sacredness of particular places when we think about mapping to remember: what are places that are being selected as centers of something? And what is the something they are centers of? And what is the particular kind of power that resides in those places selected as the center? Again, we get back to this question about the Orisha tradition and why it thrives so much versus other kinds of Africana practices.

The where, the what, the who, and the when of Africana religions—all of these are important for the study of religion more generally.



Africana Temporalities and Methods

GAY BYRON, *Howard University*

I am delighted to participate in this panel discussion, which is designed to call attention to the chronological scope of the *Journal of Africana Religions*. As a New Testament critic, I will focus my remarks on the period known as antiquity in order to set forth some points of departure for our discussion. My intellectual journey into the world of the New Testament has been rooted in an exploration of the symbolic meaning of Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Blacks in early Christian literature. In my book, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, I theorize about the ethnopolitical rhetoric associated with the use of these ethnic groups.

In particular, I have raised questions about the theological assumptions, cultural background, and literary landscape that would have given rise to the many polemical and vituperative images of Ethiopians. In one example from a second-century text known as the Acts of Peter, there is a vivid description of an Ethiopian woman. She is Black. She is demonized. She is clothed in filthy rags. She is dancing with an iron collar around her neck and chains

on her hands and feet. She is physically dismembered. Peter says in this text, "Take off her head." And he goes on to say, "Do not just cut off the head of this demon, but cut in pieces all her limbs in the sight of all these who have been approved for thy service." Apparently, this description of the Ethiopian woman served a useful function as words of encouragement and markers of self-definition for the early Christians. Yet I must admit this violent text hardly brings encouragement to me, and in fact, unlike other scholars who have encountered this material, I could neither gloss over it nor merely conclude that it was an unimportant or insignificant example from the past. This Ethiopian woman is reminiscent of enslaved African women who were branded, hanged, mocked, whipped, raped, and paraded as spectacles during the transatlantic slave trade.

So my study of Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Blacks calls attention to how a discursive rhetoric of ethnic uttering was operative in the ancient world, and also how it continues to operate in contemporary society through various forms of media and political discourse. After the publication of *Symbolic Blackness*—as much as I wanted to move on to something new—the questions that emerged from the different audiences with whom I shared this research (and that included master of divinity students, clergy, colleagues, laypersons, and peers in the academy) challenged me to consider what may have been on the other side of the symbolic references to ethnic and color-coded language. To what degree does ethnopolitical rhetoric actually offer any information about the historical realities of ancient Ethiopians? How do the ancient Ethiopians describe themselves and their religious practices? Why do Ethiopian women appear so frequently in the writings of Christian authors? And what are some of the early Christian texts generated by the Ethiopians themselves?

These questions forced me to admit the obvious, which is that the Greek and Latin sources used in my study reflect only one side of the story about the early Christians. And so this led me into a new trajectory of research focused on the Axumite Empire of the ancient Ethiopians. The Axumite Empire was considered one of the four thriving empires in the ancient world, along with Persia, Rome, and China. It flourished from the first through the sixth centuries as a leader in international trade and commerce with its own political, cultural, and economic systems. As a biblical critic who has spent a considerable amount of energy analyzing the Roman Empire, its people, and its sources, I began to wonder what would happen if I added the Axumite Empire, its people, and its sources to the geographical landscape through which I analyzed the New Testament.

My research then unfolded in three directions. First, I made a trip, a travel expedition to the religious and cultural sites of Ethiopia, including Axum, which is in Tigre, the northern region of Ethiopia. Axum is the location of the Stelae Park, the major burial ground for the kings of Ethiopia, such as Aezana and Kaleb. Axum is also the place of the queen of Sheba, who is remembered because of her visit to King Solomon and the subsequent birth of their son, Menelik. And Axum is where the church of St. Mary of Zion, the alleged resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, is located. So I pursued this travel to actually engage the Axumite Empire and its form on the continent itself. I also had to endeavor to learn yet another language, which is called Ge'ez, which is ancient Ethiopian, in order to be able to interpret the Christian sources that come from this region of antiquity. Ge'ez is still used for liturgical purposes today in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. And then the third line of inquiry for me involved visiting the Andre Tweed collection of Ethiopian artifacts and manuscripts housed at the Howard University School of Divinity. The Tweed collection has approximately 240 artifacts, including crosses, icons, musical instruments, and manuscripts. About 150 of the manuscripts include biblical and extrabiblical text, hymns, calendars, theological treatises, homilies, medical texts, and poetry.

It is in this collection that I discovered a fourteenth-century version of the Acts of Paul, which had been erroneously titled the Acts of Peter, and my plan is to render a new and fresh interpretation of this text. What continues to challenge me as an interpreter of the New Testament and early Christianity is how to navigate and negotiate the theoretical assumptions of the guild, the guild of biblical studies that presumes that antiquity is marked by a static period that usually extends from the first century up to the sixth or seventh century. So when it comes to examining Ge'ez sources, of which the earliest are dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I run into the methodological challenge of dealing with sources that are considered too late to be considered relevant for the study of the New Testament. Coupled with this is the fact that many of the stories about the ancient Ethiopians are considered legendary and thus unreliable for critical historical or exegetical purposes.

Now in order for me to leap over these methodological hurdles, I argue for a disciplinary remapping of early Christianity that is based on redrawing the boundaries and reimagining the empires of antiquity. In this way, the Axumite Empire is situated alongside the Roman Empire, and documents from the fourteenth and fifteenth century are interpreted right alongside documents

from the third and fourth century. Collections of artifacts, such as the Andre Tweed collection of sacred Ethiopian artifacts and manuscripts, are included in the archival exegetical process alongside traditional historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation.

So as we can see, the question I want to toss out for us today is what happens when all of these boundaries are blurred, these boundaries of temporalities, these boundaries of geographies, these boundaries of text? What happens when we just put it all together on the same page or on the same table and look at it as a means for critical inquiry into a group of people—in particular, the ancient Ethiopians who have been marginalized from critical study of the Bible? So this leads, then, to going beyond the pursuit of biblical scholarship based on a narrow focus on a particular canonical text and opens up opportunities to explore questions, concerns, and insights that arise from other disciplines that intersect with Africana religions and world Christianity.

It is in redrawing the boundaries and reimagining the empires of antiquity that we might begin to change the way we understand the broad scope and rich trajectories of early Christianity. I am excited that we have this new *Journal of Africana Religions* as a place where the scholarship of antiquity can interface seamlessly with the scholarship of other periods of history across a wide range of religions, regions, and methodological perspectives. I look forward to encouraging my colleagues in biblical studies to read and to contribute to the journal. I look forward to having an accessible interdisciplinary resource that engages the wide array of intersectional realities of Africana scholarship and a resource that unashamedly blurs the boundaries of our respective methodological and theoretical frameworks.

PAUL LOVEJOY, *York University*

I am going to talk specifically about methodological issues in the study of religion from a historical and biographical perspective. Before I begin, we have been somewhat concerned, confused, debating what do we mean by “religion”? What is religion? I want to give you one of my experiences where I had to confront this issue. I want to take you back to the year 1975 when I was a young professor. I was actually teaching at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, and I was sitting in the police station in Kano. At that time, to do research in

Northern Nigeria you needed research clearance from three different levels of government, and I was getting it at the Kano local level police station, and I got myself into a lot of trouble. Now the trouble was not violent, it was not threatening, it was not anything to do with my person; the trouble had to do with intellectual concerns. One of the questions I was asked was, what was my religion? And instead of having prepared myself with some simple answer, I gave the truth, and I said, "Well, I don't really have any." Well, that was not acceptable. It simply was not acceptable. So then I drew on the fact that my father was a Unitarian minister, and I said, "Well, I'm a Unitarian." Well, that is when I got into trouble. Now I had to explain to these Muslim police officers what the hell a Unitarian was, and the more I said, the more confused they became, and they said, "That's simply impossible." And we went on and on, and it went for two hours. In the end, I had fifteen police officers gathered around me most curious about me not because of my skin color, because half the conversation was in Hausa and the other half was in English. It was that they were just trying to comprehend the possibility that somebody could actually believe there was no God. And for me that brought home a whole series of very important things, some of which I only half digested because if I had fully digested it, I would not have said what I said. I would not even have gone there.

But what it did bring home, and what was really very important, is that the police did not care about the sensitive research topics that I was working on—namely, local plantation slavery. They did not care about that. They were worried about my belief in God. And what I have come to realize is that the people that I was talking to completely believed that it was impossible to lie in certain circumstances. Now me being a white person, being a North American, being whatever, this was a concept, I mean, I could not understand at all myself. But they would say, yes, if someone testified in court in 1900 about X, Y, or Z, they were telling the truth. The possibility they would have been telling a lie was just inconceivable—not so today—but back then and in terms of their conception of what religion was, the whole worldview, the whole conception of how people lived, it was, and that framework was religious, it was Muslim. There was no question.

So, for me the importance of studying religion in African history and in the development of the African diaspora is central to understanding African cultures and societies and their transformations globally. The focus

has many dimensions, from philosophical and cultural to social and political, and inevitably has an aesthetic component that underlines music, art, and spirituality. As a historian, nevertheless, my concern is with the study of religion from a historical perspective—that is, how religion was comprehended in specific times and places and how it was interpreted and expressed by the many individual people and collective communities of those settings. Religion can be examined in isolation as a system of beliefs, as philosophical constructs, the ways in which moral issues are resolved, and as the social meaning of spiritual values. The religious underpinnings of aesthetics can also be examined with reference to art forms and specific works of artistic expression. These very legitimate approaches are in themselves part of the historical continuum that can be examined without being concerned with change and transformation. But I am interested in change and transformation.

For the historian who focuses on context and disjuncture, on the lack of unity that arises out of disagreement and conflict and the quest for unity and conformity that underlies social and political communities, studying African history and the African diaspora in the Americas and elsewhere means paying attention to methodological issues that seem to be ignored much of the time in a lot of the scholarship—although not necessarily by anyone in this room or by the latest developments in the study of religious histories. But historians, historians of Africa, and historians of the African diaspora very often do make the types of mistakes and problems that I am going to discuss. Religion is often considered static, unchanging, and applicable to whole societies and all people, when we know far too often that people disagree over religion as they do over almost everything else and that a more accurate representation of religious worldviews and cultural expression should emphasize diversity and varying interpretations. There are indeed aspects of religion that do not change, at least not very much over time. But the significance of even relatively small differences has to be examined in historical context. The challenge is to register these differences and calculate their impact. What is a serious matter and what is a minor change or disagreement over interpretations are questions that have to be addressed. Many issues that are serious sectarian debates may in fact appear to outsiders as relatively trivial differences in interpretation, such as whether Muslims should pray with their arms crossed or at their sides or whether it is acceptable to play cards on Sunday, if at all. From an analytical perspective what might appear to be a relatively trivial issue of dispute may in fact have serious consequences.

Hence, historical judgment cannot rest on the biased views of outsiders who reach conclusions without understanding the motivations of historical actors as they behave in specific contexts. It is important to assess whether or not a minor issue is being manipulated for religious or other ends and whether specific doctrinal disagreements that may seem like splitting hairs are recognized as serious and worth dying over. Historians are faced with these dilemmas and are required to decipher meanings that sometimes may seem obscure, if not trivial. From a historical perspective, the first methodological problem in looking at African religions is the danger of seeing religion as unchanging and uniform over time and space. In the broadest conceptions, references to something called African religions, or even more problematic, African religion in the singular, highlight this danger. There are equally invalid references historically to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, among other religions, as if these religions have been uniform and unchanging and are consolidated in standardized forms of religious expression today or were at any time in the past. With respect to the so-called world religions, it is easy to see the falsehood of this inference through the many wars that pitted Christians against Christians, Muslims against Muslims, or Zionists against reform-minded Jews. Similarly, religious beliefs and expressions of people in various parts of Africa can hardly be considered to have been standardized across the continent, although in scholarly works, religion has often been treated exactly in such a uniform and stereotyped fashion. The idea that similarities and specific peculiarities apply across cultures is better studied than assumed.

The equally fallacious concept of traditional religion holds the same problem. The term suggests an unchanging timeless history based on some undetermined yet often glorified or castigated traditions. The intention behind employing tradition as an analytical construct is often to provide a parallel to Christianity, Islam, and other religions whose proponents have attempted periodically to define orthodoxy and heresy. Or the term is used as a baseline of unknown or unexplained meaning from which to measure change or enable comparison. The concept of traditional religion is thereby determined within boundaries that may in fact not exist but are determined by other religions. The term has often been employed when scholars and students have not understood or when they don't want to try to understand the historical complexities that are under examination. The term "traditional religion," like "African religion," has been convenient in avoiding rigorous historical and cultural analysis.

Another mistake in approach, in my opinion, is the focus on what many scholars have referred to as “syncretism,” that is, the conscious or not-conscious mixture of religious beliefs and practices. The idea may seem appealing on occasion because it can be shown that religious ideas have spread from one area to another, becoming important in the practices of people, where the underlying ideas and forms of symbolic expression had not existed before. The so-called syncretic elements can range from relatively minor symbols of expression, such as what is used at religious shrines, to the more significant spread of religious ideas, such as the adoption of Ifa divination in areas outside of where Yoruba-speaking people are to be found, such as in Dahomey and areas further west in modern Benin and Togo. The religious practices found in Cuba and Brazil and other parts of the African diaspora are often claimed to be syncretic, mixing so-called traditional elements of Orisha worship that is associated with Yoruba practices with Christian rituals and symbolisms that derive from Catholicism principally and from the sanctified structures of the church; the hierarchy of the Spanish, Portuguese, and Vatican; and ultimately the Christian documents and orthodoxy that underlie these. While philosophical and artistic dimensions of contemporary religious forms can benefit from a study of different influences and how these influences have been interpreted in complex contexts, the methodological problems are profound when it is not recognized that such changes and adaptations occurred historically and in specific contexts, often in colonial and postcolonial settings in which slavery and African origins are distant and distorted memories.

For now, for the rest of my talk, I want to talk on a subject that raises its own particular problem, which is Muslims in both Africa and the Americas. My concern here is with a specific religious setting that defines many of the standard methodological terms: “tradition,” “African,” and “syncretism.”

Islam in the African context in my opinion is often underrepresented in the study of religion in Africa and the African diaspora and, in some cases, is subjected to the influences of the broader methodological problems that I have outlined. In some cases, Islam is considered a foreign religion and a religion of outsiders who are not indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa, although this can be shown to be clearly false historically. Islam has been practiced south of the Sahara at least since the tenth century, and this region has been subjected to various streams of Islamic thought, including Ibadite and Sufi. As is well-known, Timbuktu had been the center of Islamic learning and scholarship for several hundred years before the development of the transatlantic slave trade,

and it was one such location of Islamic education. Indeed, a legitimate and important subject of religious history is the spread of Islamic learning and the rise of Sufism as a system of thought and motivation and political and social action. It is sometimes thought that the use of talismans, amulets, and Qur'anic verses written on paper and often sewn in leather pouches to be worn around the neck, the waist, or attached to clothing is somehow syncretic. But in fact, this has been a standard Islamic practice in West Africa for hundreds and hundreds of years, and such items are even sold to non-Muslims, who consider them powerful, mystical forms of protection. The fact that such items were widely used in no way indicates a form of syncretism or non-Islamic practice. Devout Muslims, often scholars and students of Arabic, routinely made and sold such charms as a form of religious expression and as a means of securing a livelihood. Moreover, the prevalence of Bori ceremonies of North Africa and the music that derives from griots that in combination has produced the Gnawan music in Morocco are testimonies of the complexity of religious practice in Islamic lands, not part of something that must be considered pre-Islamic.

It cannot be assumed that such practices represent pre-Islamic customs or traditions, since we have no knowledge and no evidence of what religious practice and musical expressions were like before Islam was dominant in many parts of the areas where these practices are found. It is incorrect, therefore, to argue that they are pre-Islamic, although this is often done. What we do know is that these forms of cultural expression have existed for a long time in conjunction with the observance of Islam. Griots have been observed since the days of medieval Mali at least, and Bori along with Zar and Gnawa are very old and are to be found from Morocco to Iran at least, as well as in areas of sub-Saharan Africa. Their antiquity and how these influences have changed over time are subjects of study, not proof of something that has remained unchanging in a world dominated by Muslims.

To illustrate the complexities of studying religion from a historical perspective, I want to draw briefly on a couple of cases of individual Muslims in the Americas whom I have studied. Their personal profiles and biographies demonstrate that an understanding of Islam and the role of Muslims in the African diaspora has to be examined carefully and cannot be based on a simplistic reading of Islamic history and change or lack of change. There are various studies that focus on the role of such individuals in the African diaspora and, of course, there is extensive literature on Muslims and the role of Islam in Africa and especially in West Africa. Notable of these important

contributions is the work of Allan Austin, Sylviane Diouf, Philip Curtin, and Michael Gomez. There are specific features of this Islamic background that should be emphasized: the role of literacy in Arabic, the urban origins of virtually all Muslims who have been identified as migrating to the Americas, and the distinctions among Muslims in terms of their association or lack thereof with the jihad movements of West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These characteristics distinguish the provenance of enslaved Muslims in the Americas and indicate why it is dangerous to make analogies based on a study of Africans in diaspora without an adequate understanding of the religious background of individuals.

The number of diasporic Muslims whose biographical accounts have survived amounts to at least one hundred in the Americas, as well over one thousand in West Africa. The case studies are derived from a databank of enslaved Muslims from the western and central Sudan that I have been constructing over the past twenty years or more. Some autobiographical accounts are lengthy, such as those of James Henry Dorugu, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, and Nichola Said. It has also been possible to recreate biographical studies of others, such as Muhammad Kaba Saghanughu and Richard Pierpoint. Accounts of other Muslims, such as Ibrahim Petrovitch Gannibal, the great-grandfather of Russian author Alexander Pushkin who came from the area to the south of Lake Chad but was taken across the Sahara and ultimately reached Russia, awaits full treatment.

As is clear from my overview of sources and scholarly analysis that has been completed, the number of accounts is extensive, although because of relative knowledge of specific settings and individuals and familiarity with the literature on Muslim Africa, the scholarly work itself is decidedly uneven and in need of revision and careful analysis, and this includes some of the work of Michael Gomez and Sylviane Diouf. This observation applies also to Alex Haley's partially fictionalized *Roots* as well as numerous biographical accounts of Muslims in Brazil, including the individuals studied by João José Reis in his analysis of the Muslim uprising in 1835, which is usually referred to as the Malê revolt.

Finally, I want to talk about one individual, Richard Pierpoint, who lived from about 1744 to 1838. He came from Fouta Bondou in what is now Senegal and was taken as a slave to North America in 1760, when the British controlled both St. Louis and the Senegal River Valley in West Africa. According to Pierpoint's own account, which was written in 1821, he had been an inhabitant

of Upper Canada, which is now Ontario, since 1780. He claimed to be a native of Fouta Bondou in Africa who was taken at the age of sixteen years, made a prisoner and sold as a slave, conveyed to America about the year 1760, and sold to a British army officer. He served His Majesty during the American Revolutionary War in the corps that was known as Butler's Rangers, which was a British force operating in upstate New York. And during the War of 1812, he was in a corps of colored troops that was raised on the Niagara frontier.

How representative was he of other Muslims in the Americas? It is clear that almost all Muslims who came to the Americas were males, way out of proportion to the normal ratios of males to females in the transatlantic migration. By my own estimation, based on a couple of thousand biographical accounts that I have, at least 95 percent of all the Muslims that came to the Americas, including North America, were males. The lack of females in this population, in and of itself, is one of the reasons why Islam had difficulty surviving in these areas. The second point is that while the total number of enslaved Africans who came to North America by comparison with other parts of the Americas was relatively small, being only slightly more than the total number of Africans who went to Barbados, nonetheless, proportionately within the population that came to North America, a very large proportion of that population, larger than anywhere else in the Americas, was Muslim, and that meant Muslim male. And that was in all regions of what became the United States: Louisiana, South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and the northern states—a disproportionate percentage of adult male Muslims.

Pierpoint was one of such individuals whose life story is not very well-known. When Pierpoint first arrived in North America, he belonged to a British officer from whom he received his name. Apparently, he subsequently lived in Maryland but escaped to the British lines in the American War of Independence and by 1779 was a soldier in the militia, a unit under Captain John Butler and stationed at Fort Niagara. Pierpoint fought in Butler's Rangers in the Mohawk Valley as well as parts of Pennsylvania and seems to have been with Butler's Rangers until the end of the war. According to a Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Coffin, the adjutant general of the militia stationed at Fort York (which is now Toronto), Pierpoint, better known as Captain Dick, was the "first colored man proposed to raise a corps of men of color on the Niagara frontier" in the War of 1812. And, indeed, in the War of 1812, Pierpoint and his colored troops were crucial in the battle of Queenstown Heights, which was the battle that defeated the Americans and prevented Canada from falling

into the hands of the United States. Pierpoint's all-black corps was involved in the successful defense at Queenston Heights in the battle in which General Isaac Brock, a Canadian hero, lost his life. By early 1791, Pierpoint was living on two plots of land totaling two hundred acres that he had been given in what is now the city of St. Catharines. He is recorded as one of twelve men to petition Governor John Graves Simcoe, who was the British governor who abolished slavery in Upper Canada (although that total abolition of slavery was turned back in the Privy Council in London, and the act was only allowed to say that no more slaves could be brought into Upper Canada—that is, what is now Ontario). He apparently lived in Grantham or Niagara until war broke out in 1812, and at the advanced age of sixty-eight he formed the militia. In 1815, he was granted additional land in the area of Ontario that at the time was known as Queens Bush, and he attempted to open five acres of land, which he had to clear in order to gain full title. But because of his age, he was unable to do that. It was at that time that he petitioned the British government in Ontario, in Upper Canada, for relief and indeed requested that he be allowed to return to his native country of Fouta Bondou. Unfortunately for Pierpoint, the request to return to Fouta Bondou was not granted, although he was granted farmland in what is now the modern town of Fergus, Ontario. The land ticket was issued in 1822. This has survived, but beyond this we have very little knowledge about him and his life.

Nonetheless, we can still say something about religion in relation to his life. First, Pierpoint was undoubtedly a Muslim when he crossed the Atlantic. Fouta Bondou was the first of the jihad states in West Africa, located on the Senegal River, and everyone in the state of Fouta Bondou was a Muslim, and so he would have been, too. There is no question about that. Moreover, he fits the profile that I have already described, a young adult male, Muslim coming to North America, a pattern that was typical for the whole of North America. Furthermore, his involvement in the military was also very typical of Muslims from West Africa, who were all based in towns and cities—not in villages, not in the countryside—after their military service, whether they were enslaved or free. Although we do not have any information about his continued commitment to Islam, we do have information that he did not go to church and he was not involved in any way with anything that was Christian. Finally, we do know that his final petition was to return to his homeland, which was a Muslim country, which for me further demonstrates his ongoing and continued commitment to Islam, not in some syncretic

form, but in a form that was trained and taught in West Africa: if you were enslaved and you were enslaved to Christians, you hid your religion. This was discussed in schools among little kids. What do you do when you cannot pray five times a day? What do you do when you cannot fast in the month of Ramadan? How do you hide your Islam? What can you do? You can even convert to Christianity to hide your Islam. There are other examples. One is Muhammad Kaba Saghanughu, who went to Jamaica in 1777 from Fouta Djallon and died in Jamaica in 1845 and who at the height of his influence in about 1820 wrote two Arabic manuscripts about praying in Jamaica. He was the imam of a community of Muslims in Manchester Parish in Jamaica of about one thousand Muslims. They hid themselves, but I have proof that they existed. There are other cases like this that I could give you a lot of information about, which demonstrates the extent to which Islam and the understanding of Islam was known, was maintained, was not syncretized but ultimately died out because of the inability to form lasting communities, especially in North America where Pierpoint is a perfect example. He is an isolated Muslim. He is isolated from his countrymen. He is isolated from other people of his religion. He maintains his religion, I would say, but he does not pass it on.

SHERWIN BRYANT (moderator), *Northwestern University*

Let me begin the Q&A portion of our panel by asking *how* and *when* Christianity and Islam seemed to have some impact on the making of Africa as a continent and the formulation of a notion of blackness. I would like to invite all of you to say something about the ways in which you see Christianity and Islam as having a certain sort of presence—if not as representing a certain sort of colonial imposition—within Africa and at what particular moments in time. Let me begin with Prof. Byron. How is Christianity situated in Africa and what does this particular text about an Ethiopian woman tell us about Christianity in Africa?

GAY BYRON: There were symbolic images of blackness that pervaded early Christianity. But when we tend to study Christianity, especially as it was introduced to me when I was in seminary, we tend to think of it as sort of a Eurocentric frame of reference where if there were any Blacks, it would have been somebody like the Ethiopian eunuch that we hear about in Acts 8.

So we think there may have been one or two others, if you will, Ethiopians. And what I found in my own research is that there were a number of representations of Egyptians, Ethiopians, Blacks, and blackness. So this whole color-coded language and this symbolic ethnic uttering was going on throughout early Christianity.

I endeavored to make sense out of what was going on and to question why the early Christians were so obsessed and occupied with these ethnic differences. Therefore, I developed this way of talking about this ethnopolitical rhetoric that actually called attention to the theological debates and controversies that were going on within these Christian communities. I discovered that an Ethiopian woman actually symbolizes a type of heresy within the community. So they were not necessarily concerned about the Ethiopians *per se*, but the Ethiopians could represent some otherness or some problem within the community. But then the question becomes, how was that able to take place and what type of literary landscape, what type of cultural assumptions were in place in these early Christian communities such that they could so casually talk about a Black woman like that, and that it was okay to do that? I started raising questions about it and had to, therefore, look into how gender and ethnicity intersect in these early Christian writings. So we can't talk about blackness in my case without talking about the gender dynamics that are also going on.

SHERWIN BRYANT: So do you have any sense of what it is that blackness means for the people who are writing this text, for example, in the second century or in the third century? Along those same lines, how do you place this Ethiopian literature alongside these other early Christian writings, apocryphal texts, the Gnostic gospels, and debates around Christian orthodoxy that develop over the course of those first six centuries?

GAY BRYON: That's what was at stake. There was a certain orthodoxy that had to be maintained, and therefore blackness was the way of casting doubt on the orthodoxy. So anybody who veered from these certain prescribed assumptions about Christianity were deemed the Ethiopian or the other or the "Black one." So you hit at the core of what the issue is. There was a certain theology that was to be adhered to—an orthodox theology—and when someone strayed from that, then they were the Black ones or the others, if you will.

SHERWIN BRYANT: But why? What does blackness represent for them at that particular moment? Is it about people who are sold into slavery from across the Sahel? What does blackness seem to constitute in that region of Africa?

GAY BYRON: Well, that's what took me to the Axumite Empire. When you find such an obsession about blackness or such an obsession about women in the way that I found in these early Christian texts, then we have to think about what type of threat that these Black ones present to those who were trying to uphold a certain orthodoxy in these Christian communities. Once we shift the lens away from the Roman orthodox worldview and we go to the Axumite heterodox worldview, then we can start to see the real accomplishments that were taking place alongside all of the accomplishments in the Roman Empire.

That's where my scholarship has led, to not being so defensive about what's problematic about the Ethiopians but actually to look at what indeed were the Ethiopians doing. What were those queens doing, these *kandake*, or *candaces*? The Ethiopian eunuch was actually representing the Ethiopian queen—a whole line of Nubian queens. So if we can start to tell the story from a privileged position as Africans, then it shifts the whole way we look at the study of religion and early Christianity in particular.

PAUL LOVEJOY: Sudan means the “land of the Blacks,” and in the Islamic context Black is very clearly skin color. However, what you really have to understand, what I think anybody who's interested in Africana religions must know, is the text of Ahmad Baba. In 1613, he wrote a treatise on slavery. The best version of that was translated by John Hunwick. Ahmad Baba died in the 1620s, but in 1613 when he wrote this text, he was particularly concerned with refuting a widely held legal opinion within the Islamic world that blackness and skin color were sufficient to justify enslavement. He argued, echoing a Black Muslim scholar of the tenth century, that the only justification for enslavement was unbelief. And then he went through a whole series of explanations, and, indeed, Ahmad Baba was the first to use the term “Yoruba” for people who speak the language that we now call Yoruba. “Yoruba” is a term that was used by Muslims, by Hausa, by people from Songhai before it was ever used by people who today call themselves Yoruba. Within the Islamic world in West Africa, all during this period, all before the transatlantic slave trade really takes off in any major way, issues of enslavement were being discussed—who can be enslaved, who cannot be, why, under what conditions, how they're supposed to be treated, and what happens if you become enslaved. These are people who know what's going on in the world. These are people who are knowledgeable. They are urban based. They're educated. They're literate and they're talking about these issues.

SHERWIN BRYANT: That's actually what occasioned the question in many ways for me because part of what happens by the time of Baba's writing in

the seventeenth century is that the slaving frontier for Islam has expanded in such a way that you see an increase in people who are marked as Black. There is a clear association of blackness with enslavability, which is partly what occasions Baba's treatise. That's why he has to actually refute this. It is something that's already been discussed for several centuries by this time. And yet it seems that there is something happening in this early modern period, both in terms of Christianity and in terms of Islam, around the notion of who's enslavable in relationship to specific territories that ultimately begins to constitute blackness in relationship to slavery and enslavability. And increasingly throughout the Mediterranean world you have more and more people who are of sub-Saharan African descent in large measure we might argue because of the extension of the slavery frontier on the part of both Muslims and Christians. Part of the tension in talking about Islam as an African religion seems to arise from the fact that it is also a religion that colonized and enslaved a great number of sub-Saharan Africans and played a part in the constitution of a notion of blackness as correlated to enslavability.

But me let me invite Prof. Lovejoy first to say a little bit about why there are so many Muslims in the United States and to also say a little bit about why so few of them are women. Secondly, in thinking about questions of religion in the African diaspora, Prof. Lovejoy seems to be pushing us to consider Muslims a great deal more, and I wonder how that squares with John Thornton's research on Central Africa, which he sees as thoroughly Christian by the time of the slave trade.

PAUL LOVEJOY: Thornton's absolutely correct, in my opinion, and it is no question at all that half of the enslaved Africans who went to the Americas were Bantu speaking and non-Muslim. I would flip your question about my emphasis on Muslims upside-down because the area of my primary research is Northern Nigeria and the Sokoto Caliphate. My question would be why is it there were so few Muslims in the Americas? I mean, the fact that there were more proportionately in North America than anywhere else stands out for sure, but one of the things that stands out to me is the relatively low numbers of people from Muslim areas or Muslim background that end up in the Americas anywhere. They come from two areas. They come from the western Sudan, which is basically the interior of southern Gambia, and they come from the central Sudan, which is related to the development of the Sokoto Caliphate, particularly in the early nineteenth century. Almost all Muslims

who came to North America came from the western Sudan, such as Pierpoint, so that's what we're seeing.

One of the problems in studying this question is that much of the previous research on the origins of slaves, including some of the online database work, has been incorrect. Take Senegambia, for example. The whole of the interior of that area is Muslim, except for the immediate littoral along what is now Guinea and the modern country of Sierra Leone. The majority of the population of Sierra Leone is Muslim, not Christian. All the people in Guinea Conakry are Muslim. Nearly everybody in Gambia, everybody in Senegal is Muslim. So all of the people that go out through what is often considered Sierra Leone, the upper Guinea coast, Senegambia, it is the same interior. It is Fouta Djallon and the upper Islamic states that dominate the interior from the early eighteenth century on. The other Muslims—and they mostly go to Brazil and very heavily to Bahia and are responsible for the uprising of 1835—come from the central Sudan. The other thing that you have to understand in African history is that the Yoruba wars are not Yoruba wars. It is the jihad that destroyed the Oyo Empire. An uprising in the army in 1817, which was an uprising of Muslim soldiers, overthrew the state by 1835. That sets in motion the whole of the Yoruba migration, which is almost entirely a nineteenth-century phenomenon, mostly to Brazil, but also, of course, heavily to Cuba.

We need the history. We need the history to be as exact as European history, North American history, with dates, with places, with facts.

EDWARD CURTIS: That comment takes us back to the question of Africana temporalities. I want to ask the panel about the usefulness of using the term “Africana” to talk about these phenomena. What I’m wondering is, can you offer an apology or a defense for using the term “Africana,” or should we avoid studying these phenomena under this Africana purview?

PAUL LOVEJOY: I think you're right on. I think you keep the straight and narrow. How can you understand Gnawa in southern Morocco? How can you understand what goes on in Tunisia without understanding the African diaspora, the Black African diaspora that's in the Islamic world? And if you take that out of the equation, I think you're losing a lot. What the problem is, and, yes, it is an intellectual problem, is whether Islam or Black Islam is something Africana especially or not. Let's argue that over the next ten years of the journal.

GAY BYRON: For me, the only way I can get at the kinds of questions I have about early Christianity is to have a broader Africana framework, because without that I'm not even able to bring the text to the table or the questions to

the table, and what I'm learning from this discussion is that I'm pretty much oriented around a Jewish Christian understanding of the development of early Christianity. But I also need to include the Islamic influences as well. So now what's important is that it is necessary through this journal and this conversation we're having today to look at all of the influences and all of the intersectionalities of our work. Without this Africana worldview, I would not be able to have this type of discussion.

CHARLES LONG: When we use the word "Africana," what we're trying to do is to point to other modes of temporality, to acknowledge that the old mode of temporality and history as understood by the West does not accommodate the things we want to do, not only the data but the subtlety of that data, the rhythm of that data, the modality of that data. And we want to do that so that these phenomena become a part of what enriches and makes human life understandable in a way that the older modes of doing history don't. They don't have places for them because they have to restrict things for the task they have at hand.

And so I see Africana as being the alternative way to understanding this change that needs to take place in our understanding of the way human beings inhabit the world. I don't look upon the notion of Africana as defined in an institution. It is a vision or mode or horizon or a certain kind of approach. Sometimes there are things you want to say but there is no place to say them. I think that what Africana may be able to do is to create a place where people can all say these things that need to be said but have not been said yet.



Theorizing Africana Religions: A Response

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My field of training is U.S. religious history. We often flatten that to a job search category, which we describe as "American religions." I have always liked this locution precisely because I see it as totally unaware of its hegemony and, therefore, to borrow from Yvonne Chireau's very alluring call, it is open in no small way, I think, to serious play—and should be. That plural "religions," and the phrase "American religions," suggests to me an interest in diversity—so

many different people, so many religions. But that “American” at the outset shows the sneaky truth of the matter. American religions are religions branded with a flag, a political project, a set of economic assumptions and, I argue, an evangelical heart. To be sure, one might study Aruba or Marcus Garvey or Vishnu statuary in Skokie, Illinois, in the context of the study of American religions. But such a study has, I think, a presumptive teleological frame. How do they—those diverse artifacts, beliefs, and rituals—fit into capital *I* “It,” into that word “American” that stares at them wherever they go?

This is, of course, a very familiar rant. It is a rant basically about delusion. You think you are being very expansive and inclusive, perhaps even democratic, but in fact there is a lurking specter framing the entire analytical venture. Todd Ochoa has written beautifully, for example, about Palo, a Congo-inspired Creole tradition related to Santería. Palo is a craft, according to Ochoa, in which “the living work with the dead to help or harm the living.” The central tool of Palo, one of the central pieces of evidence in his own analysis, is the creation and care of the *prendas*. *Prendas* are containers “stuffed full of dirt, sticks, feathers, and *nfumbe*—entities constituted of human remains.” And in Ochoa’s account, *prendas* cannot be controlled by institutions or authority. They cross borders and huddle in shadows. They are relentlessly, personally, and deeply consequential. They are human and superhuman. Yet if I put a pile of *prendas* under the museum-wall words “American religions,” something happens to it I think. It goes from that gorgeous anthropological particularity into that dreaded category; it becomes an exhibit. An exhibit of exactly the question that has been bothering us today and yesterday. The question “What is American?” has been one of the questions of my own career.

Today the question “What is Africana?” becomes all of ours. Paul Christopher Johnson remarked, “Not everything has to be about Africa for peoples of African descent.” That was a sneaky and awesome one-liner, I thought. When you study Africana religions, have we not decided that everything does—that the *Africana*, I put it in italics, effectively brands the religion as a circulating steward, a missionary, a citizen of Africa? Those white Europeans playing at Candomblé, those Sri Lankan kafirs completing the stations of the cross, or Lupe Fiasco praising—here I learned the song, I had never heard it before—the “sisters and the mothers of ours / Who cover theyselves ‘cause they’re lovers of God.” All of them are gathered into Africana religions as a categorization at their own risk, since they become in that very categorization trapped into a territory not of their making—but perhaps for some of

them an intention—and into a concept more singular than their possible diversity. Another way of putting this is to say that I sometimes worry for myself, because I labor and I pile up my own weird plot of American religions, that I'm assembling a collective like eBay or Amazon Marketplace. I, like eBay, mean really well by my gathering. It is cheaper pricing, it is self-constructed, perhaps personally negotiated, but to be sure I am still the frame of their presence. eBay may be for the people but eBay remains the final profiteer. The frame determines the concept even though we know once we get that object home, of course, anything can happen to it.

Classification, we know, is not ultimate control. And yet classify we do—dangerously, excitedly. Edward Curtis asked in a Q&A, “Should we be studying these things under the term ‘Africana?’” And I love that question. And I agree with the sort of subterranean anxiety that provoked it. I myself want to run straight into it like a foolish child. I want to play with the words, to think about the rich capacity of that word “Africana,” as I like to play with that word “American” before I smother it into a false diversity. “Oh, it is just a lot of things; we don't need to name it,” I say to myself.

No, before we do that, let us try to name it. I want to get into what I think it means. And for me, it is easier to begin with using the example of “American” since it is one I have played with for a longer time. So again, when I talk about playing with it, I mean I want to play with it in its most oppressive sense, ask what we mean when we say something is “an American religion,” those essences that Darlene just invoked, like “an American bomb,” or “an American in Paris.” I want to figure out the gross etiquette and embarrassing flatness that such subjects might possess when they are circulating abroad. And so I say things myself like, “American religion is evangelical. American religion is racist. American religion is prophetic.” I say these things not because I think they are going to survive any kind of serious survey of religions in America or religions practiced by Canadians or Mexicans or U.S. citizens abroad, but because I want to provoke us to wonder what we mean when we modify a plural form with a totalizing adjective such as “Africana” or “American.”

It seems we can do this so much more easily when we are outside the realm of the religious. So if I ask what the telling components would be, for example, to Mexican food, German automobiles, Japanese etiquette, Israeli politics, all of us would stumble perhaps with no small controversy toward a kind of satisfactory cluster of terms. Yet when we fumble around with something plus “religions,” that is Africana religions, American religions, Greek religions, we tend to get all nervous and plural—“No, no, everything gets to be involved.”

So to me, if we just stick to a kind of geography, then I worry we are going to collapse into universalisms like “Africana religions are everywhere,” which of course is true, but a truth so banal to be utterly worthless in its articulation. We are all just studying everything, everywhere, Africana religions. That cannot be right, and we today try to figure out what is not right. What is the thing?

So the foregoing comments are meant to reflect what I saw as a kind of simmering question. I think that those of us concerned with the history, the anthropology of migratory Africa feel more than just a kind of nerdy consciousness around this inquiry. We are not just about inclusivity in that kind of classic academic sense of “Well, it could be the endless parsing.” That is not only it.

There is also a special pain in the question of what is Africana religions. And I am going to try to highlight to close just three reasons why I think there is a particular pain around that question. First, Yvonne Chireau remarked that Africana religion is something to do with Africa, to the relationship of Africa. Charles Long added in his talk that enslavement, its experience and concept—and, indeed, he has written about this beautifully—was integral to the description of Africa. Let me combine these comments to suggest that the reason it is hard to define Africana religions is because its diagnosis must necessarily include the legacy of human bodies as commodities, and it is very difficult to want to be, again, classificatory about a subject in which classification has had such a haunting and terrifying role.

Religion—here is my definitional plot—is a social answer to individual questions. Religion works only if one returns to it; indeed, this is the only measure, I argue, of religion working. A religion needs participants for it to be. It does not work if nobody makes it, and I would argue that a religion of a solo subject is spirituality, but we can plot that some other day. It does not matter if the answers that religions offer are good answers or bad answers or satisfying answers. It matters only that those are the answers that participants create and to which they return. So if your body is not something under which you have control, how can you work religion? If your community is something determined by others, if it is arbitrary rather than elective, how can you conceive a religion?

Second, to begin her talk last night, Sylviane Diouf suggested that she began her work for *Servants of Allah*, not because—I love this—she knew something, but because she wanted to know something. Sylvester Johnson remarked during the Q&A that the centrality of texts in the humanities has

led to an occlusion of nontextural religious traditions within religious studies departments. I want to connect those comments to Paul Lovejoy's passionate call to the archives, which he promises are abundant, to get these stories together. And it has been perhaps hard to define Africana religions because we have been uncertain whether we can know what we want to know. Professor Lovejoy's remarks were to me among the most revolutionary from today. I think he in his speaking debunked a vast prejudice that has determined an ongoing scholarly, disciplinary, faculty silence, like a bigotry that says women can't do math and therefore fewer girls feel competent in the subject. A circulating sense even by many of our scholarly friends is that Africana religions has no archive, and this has led to a failure of scholarship in its presence and therefore a failure of knowledge.

Third and related, I think it is hard to name an Africana religion because it has not been done in a coherent or disciplined way yet, because there are all these bibliographies that we have been scrapping together and emailing or typing out and handing to one another. It is hard to name Africana religions because—and this is an astonishing realization to me about the history of the humanities—this journal literally signals its formal diagnosis as an interdisciplinary or, as Dianne Diakité and Tracey Hucks wrote wonderfully about in the first issue of the *Journal of Africana Religions*, transdisciplinary subject considered, we hope, and I think see here today, as the best postcolonial scholarly ethics all of us can muster. That is the revolution: postcolonial scholarly ethics. As we named Africana religion, we have tried many things, much to admirable singular effect. But the creation of a field, as Dr. Charles Long told us to emphasize in holding up that first issue, does feel to be happening here. And so I want to celebrate the kind of blank canvas of this beginning and hope that we continue to feel that there are absolutely no shibboleths—religious, ethical, geographic—which would be too precious to question, rewrite, and utterly revise.