Message from the Editor

Religion is a key element in the social lives of practitioners of African-derived religion. It pervades every aspect of their daily lives even in ways that are not easily perceptible. In the study of African Diaspora, religion has played a key role because it was the most visible evidence of a social practice that demonstrated a connection to Africa. Religious and spiritual practice in everyday life figure prominently in how the diaspora is sustained, expanded and (re)created in different spaces all over the world. As the field of African diasporic religion has expanded within the last ten years, discussions have opened up regarding its links to globalization, authenticity, and (re)connection with continental Africa (Matory 2008; Palmie 2008; Selka 2013).

In the study of the African Diaspora, ideas of circulation, exchange, and (re)production are central. Exploring the African Diaspora provides an opportunity to think about the similarities that bind individuals and make an African Diaspora; but also it provides an opportunity to reflect on the differences that mark the uniqueness of the cultures, social practices, political and economic systems created by peoples of African descent throughout the globe. This reflection opens up new avenues of discovery and discussion within African Diaspora studies and once again emphasizes the diversity of experiences and individuals who make up the African Diaspora.

Within the diverse religious practices of the African Diaspora, one finds an overarching concern with maintaining an “authentic Africanity.” In contemporary times the concept of authenticity has become quite contentious due to the transnational nature of many of these religious practices. Scholars such as Stephan Palmie (2008) have pushed scholars to thoroughly examine these undertheorized, but overused, concepts. He has challenged scholars to better demonstrate how concepts such as “authentic Africanity” or transnationality are actualized in the social realities and lived religious experience of practitioners of African diasporic religions. Younger scholars, like the ones whose works are featured in this issue, are responding to that call. They are pushing the boundaries to explore how notions of blackness and Africanness are (re)created and expressed in the varying locations where the African Diaspora exist. I’m pleased to say that at the heart of this growing field is solid and rich ethnographic fieldwork.

Although Africans have traveled throughout the world, long before the advent of slavery, the modern understanding of the African Diaspora begins with the forced migration of black bodies from the West coast of Africa to the shores of the rich producing lands of the Americas. When one speaks of African Diaspora, one refers to
people of African descent wherever they may be. Within this understanding of the diaspora, we must also include those who are not of African descent, but yet who follow the religious or sociocultural practices created and promulgated by peoples of African descent. In this volume, Wakengut’s article on Rastafari in Germany sheds more light on this segment of the African Diaspora. In this issue, the articles explore different religious practices in different geographical areas and demonstrate the breadth and diversity of the African Diaspora and its religious practices. Today the mobilization is mostly voluntary and people of African descent migrate to many different parts of the globe and with them they bring their sociocultural and religious practices. In addition, the advent of new digital media increases their ability to export their sociocultural and religious practices around the globe.

The articles in this volume discuss adaptation, immigration, globalization and transnationalism in connection with the African Diaspora. In all of these articles, we see how African diasporic religions are transmitted and introduced to new spaces and places; and how these adherents adapt to new environments and how these religious practices and spiritual pathways aid them in that process. The circuits and networks of individuals who transmit religious ideas and praxis among African diasporic communities is one of the reasons this topic of study is so dynamic (Clarke 2004; Matory 2005; Scott 1986).

In African diasporic religion the emphasis is on the efficacy in the quotidian life of the practitioner. These spiritual practices assist practitioners in their daily life with healing, attaining gainful employment, maintaining positive energies in one’s immediate surroundings, adapting to new home countries, dealing with racism, or finding a new more affirmative identity. In one way or another, these articles explore how practitioners use religious practices to transform their immediate lives.

The issues explores how religion is a tool which helps immigrants adapt to their new surroundings, while also impacting and transforming their new adoptive host community. Munier’s article, “Self, Lwa and Haiti: Adherence Process and ‘Reinvention of the Self’ by a Therapeutic Use of Haitian Vodou in Montreal” examines how adapting and integrating into a host society requires the therapeutic use of Vodou. This way of using and interacting with Vodou then allows Nadine (an immigrant who arrived in Montreal as a non-devotee) to become part of a spiritual and cultural transnational network of practitioners, healers, and priests. Munier investigates how through this religious practice identity is recreated through the construction of a “Haitianness” grounded in religious cultural symbolism. His intervention demonstrates how the re-interpretation of identity and self through the interaction with and mediation of the lwa (Vodou deities) assist the individual in re-inventing themselves and their lives. In this particular case, the mediation prompted a woman to become a priestess, and thus be able to assist others and possibly have transformative effects on the lives of those within her community.
Beryl’s article, “Fostering Community Among African Migrant Christians in Massachusetts,” explores how religion functions in the process of immigration in the North American context among central African immigrants. Beryl focuses on how African immigrants use their participation in their Pentecostal church to help them acclimate to a new environment and recreate a familial network with other African immigrants in the Boston metropolitan area. Beryl demonstrates how a somewhat marginalized community strives to create “intimacy” and “bonds” that will tie them, one could even say anchor them, to a community to combat the feelings of homesickness and loss that often accompany migration. She closely examines how the church leaders specifically cultivate belonging within their congregation to create social ties that will eventually assist this immigrant community in achieving both psychological and material success. Faith becomes the salient vehicle through which both psychological, social, political and economic ties that establish community are formed.

These kinds of forging of connections and communities through faith is also evident in Wakengut’s “Rastafari in Germany: Jamaican Roots and Global–Local Influences.” In this community of white German Rastafarians, we see how accessing “African” or “Blackness” can take on different meanings within a new context. This article expands the boundaries of how the African Diaspora and “blackness” is usually conceptualized by exploring how those of non-African descent lay claim to such categories. The article also calls into question the role of strategic essentialism in the construction of identity. Wakengut examines how German Rastafari adapt the tenets of Rastafari in their attempts to create a “symbolic counterworld” to what they perceive to be a dominant German culture.

Another article that richly demonstrates how practitioners take an African diasporic religious practice and adapt it to their immediate environment, adjusting and adapting to meet their social, psychological and religious needs is Townsend’s “Drumming for the Orisa: (Re)Inventing Yoruba Identity in Oyotunji Village.” Music and dance performance are a major part of African diasporic religious practice. Townsend highlights how adaptation and “transposition” (Johnson 2007)—“re-inscription of religious practices onto new maps” (Selka 2013:7)—have helped orisha worshippers in Oyotunji Village in South Carolina to create their own connections and bonds to Yorubaland. Simultaneously, orisha worshippers introduce their own rhythms and songs to incorporate their own experiences as African Americans in the United States into the ritual and spiritual music played for the deities. While some other African American practitioners might refer to this as “invention” (Palmie 1996), for these practitioners it is simply part and parcel of the process of religious transposition that attests to the dynamism of this lived religion that has undergone many reinventions, recreations, and transformations in its journey across the Atlantic to spaces in the New World many centuries ago. Townsend’s contribution is unique in that it clarifies how the religious music of orisha orders the social world of practitioners and reinforces social norms and behaviors. As such music is not only a primary vehicle through which
practitioners communicate with their deities and ancestral spirits, but also a vehicle through which social hierarchies are structured. I hope this offering will give readers a glimpse into and an initial understanding of the diversity and dynamism of African diasporic religions and the impact they have not only their community of practitioners but on transnational networks and political economies of identity, mobility, and globalization. May scholars of African diasporic religions continue to investigate the lived experiences of practitioners and the larger implications these have for both local and transnational communities and networks of spiritual exchange. These essays highlight the necessity to continue to employ rich “ethnographic, historically and culturally nuanced research and interpretive methods” (Hanchard 2004:148). The study of the African Diaspora continues to offer us new and innovative ways of viewing ourselves, and the world with which we interact on a daily basis.

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References

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