

**The 15th Annual Africa/Diaspora Conference.
Traditional/Indigenous African Institutions and Systems in an
Era of Globalization: Beyond Research and Theory**

**Presented by the Center for African Peace & Conflict Resolution
and THE PAN AFRICAN STUDIES PROGRAM
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The drums spoke first at the opening ceremonies of the fifteen annual Africa/Diaspora conference. April 28, 2006, Tyehimba Kokayi of the Sacramento Soul Collective and Kamau Mensah of Komedenu Children of the Drum filled the Redwood Room with subtle, tranquil rhythms, a fitting welcome for the thirty-eight scholars from nine countries and five American states here to discuss the status and viability of indigenous African institutions in the current era of globalization. More than two hundred fifty people attended the three day conference featuring a total of twenty-five scholarly papers read at four plenary panels and four concurrent panels. We will publish most of the papers on this website as we receive the final drafts from the authors.

Read at the climax of the opening ceremonies, the keynote address delivered by Professor Chudi Uwazurike of City University, New York, envisions a mutually beneficial reciprocity between the global diaspora and indigenous institutions. Specifically, he foresees the evolution of 20th century cultural PanAfricanism into 21st century economic, entrepreneurial, and technological PanAfricanism. “No African development without passion, and no passion without roots,” he insists.

Equally upbeat is Steve Sharra’s paper, “Life Writing and the Human Being: Teachers, Munthu, and Peace Education in Malawi,” read later that day for Plenary 3, *The Role of Indigenous Institutions in Peace, Democracy, and Health*. Sharra describes the Malawi institution of Munthu, an endogenous institution that does not abandon indigenous tradition but retains it “as a basis for adapting foreign systems.” Using autobiography as praxis, teachers of Munthu inculcate not a static ideology but a dynamically endogenous mode of peace education.

In the same panel, Chika B. Onwuekwe of University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, was far less upbeat. In his paper, “Ungovernable: Africa in the 21st Century,” he argues that most of Africa is “ungovernably” rife with corruption and violence but suggests that the global diaspora should get involved in order to save Africa from herself and, thereby, unite in a common mission.

Nevertheless, Krishna Guadalupe’s paper, “Sudan: Resilience within the Context of Adversity,” read earlier that day is more optimistic. Despite the 80% poverty rate and a series of dictatorial regimes, the indigenous community groups and the basic etiquette of poorest Sudanese—“always sharing what little they have”—predispose the people to derive the greatest benefit from the efforts of global agencies to develop community based projects.

Also, Deborah Leblanc’s paper, “Creating Partnerships: USA Faculty and Gambia” read for Concurrent Panel III, *African culture, family and partnership building*, foresees fruitful partnerships between African, Caribbean, and American university faculties.

Moreover, in the very first plenary panel, *Case Studies on Women and Law and Indigenous Justice*, meeting the afternoon before official opening ceremonies, Chukwugozie Maduka and Ernest Uwazie read their paper, "Revisiting Legal Imposition in Present Nigeria: A case Study of Ezeship (traditional rulership) Conflicts in Ehime Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria." Their paper advocates traditional chieftaincies as indispensable supplements to a State run court system because the poor often cannot afford access to the courts, and chieftains can mediate where the courts can only punish and reward.

However, most of the remaining conference papers describe far more uneasy relationships between globalization and indigenous institutions. On one hand, some variously suggest that if PanAfricanism rides the wake of globalization, then the shipping lines creating that wake move in response to the colonial interests of the industrialized nations, devoting enormous resources to demonizing indigenous African institutions and driving them to extinction. On the other hand, some describe humanitarian programs that are international in scope and universal in ideology—poverty programs, AIDS programs, women's rights groups, children's rights groups, and gay rights groups—facing entrenched opposition from indigenous institutions.

Nevertheless, a spirit of investigation prevailed. As always at CAPCR conferences, discussion was lively, yet no free-form debates erupted between individuals on either side of such a conspicuous point of contention.

Globalization as Hegemony.

Historically and theoretically, Yeboah Kwame's paper, "The Impact of Globalization on African Culture," also read during Concurrent Panel III, best contextualizes some papers' anti-hegemonic emphasis. Globalization is not new to Africa, he observes. From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, tens of millions of African bodies were globalized by the slave trade. In 1844, Europeans globalized the land by dividing it between them. In the process, they reductively "localized" African cultures, trivializing them in comparison to Europe's global, colonial interests. It is globalization in this sense, he argues, that continues "diluting," "demonizing" and "repressing" African cultures at an incomparably faster rate than it is spreading PanAfricanism.

On the same day, for Plenary 3, John Njoku of Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, read his paper "Indigenous Institutions and Civil Practices Among the Igbo," describing the Nigerian institution of the drum, specifically, the ogenne. All traffic yields to the "town crier" playing the ogenne which calls the people to assemble to hear the law, a civil institution at odds with World Bank criteria of good government but, nonetheless, viable and necessary; for, "redeeming African is possible through indigenous institutions."

Read for the same panel, Hilda Dunkwu's and John Mathieu Essis's paper, "Decentralization and Democracy: Indigenous Institutions in Mali's Transition to Democracy," emphasizes the growing opposition of local griots, chieftains, and elders to humanitarian NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) founded upon European and American assumptions.

On the same day, for Concurrent Panel IV, *Indigenous Conflict management institutions and human rights in Africa*, Uriel Addo-Kissi of the University of Southern Denmark, Odense, read his paper “Chieftaincy Institutions in this Era of Globalization,” advocating the efficiency of Botswanan and Ghanaian chieftains as “inexpensive mediators” while decrying the European history of undermining their credibility by co-opting them, i.e., strengthening some and weakening others in the interests of streamlining colonial control. His paper also contrasts the post-colonial repression of chieftaincy in Ghana to the more collaborative relationship between the constitutional government and local chiefs in contemporary Botswana.

In the same panel, Ako Rhuks Temitope of Kent Law School, Canterbury, England, read his paper, “Oil: Global Need, Local Greed; Resolving the Conflicts in Nigeria’s Delta Region,” outlining the three stages of global oil profiteering—exploration, assessment, and production—each, in its turn, taking a toll on the Nigeria’s wilderness, protective wetlands, farmlands, and fishing harvests. He condemns local politicians growing wealthy on kickbacks from international oil firms at the expense of their people.

In the very first plenary panel, Professor Isaac Albert of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria read his paper, “From ‘Owo Crisis’ to ‘Dagbon Dispute’; Lessons in the Politicization of Chieftaincy Disputes in Modern Nigeria and Ghana.” Like Addo-Kissi, he also traces not only a history of colonial manipulation that disastrously escalated conflicts between chieftains but also a history of post-colonial politicians’ hostility toward the authority of chieftains. Although the politicization of the chieftaincy may have incurably corrupted the institution, resulting in many chiefs becoming politicians rather than performing the traditional role of speaking for their communities, he still advocates a return to the traditional roles of chiefs in Nigeria and Ghana because “politicized conflicts escalate conflicts,” whereas he deems communities to be more predisposed to defusing conflicts

Friday morning, in Concurrent Panel I, *Global Values and Local Youth: International Institutions Influence of Morality and Personhood*, Melissa Hackman’s paper, “Morality, citizenship and belongings: An ‘Ex-Gay’ Christian Ministry in Cape Town, South Africa,” cites the existence of indigenous terms for same-sex sexual activity and other research as bases for asserting that homophobia “is a white western import that came with colonialism and polluted African traditions.”

Universal Humanitarianism versus Indigenous Insitutions.

Also in Concurrent Panel I, however, Kristen Cheney’s “Global Discourses, national development and local childhoods” describes the dilemma of NGOs freeing children from negative local traditions deemed abusive according to Western norms while, at the same time, alienating children from their communities. Nevertheless, “both [African] nations and their children are learning to harness the authority of universal children’s rights discourses and childhood identity in order to gain crucial entitlements.”

In the same panel Tia Nicole Leak’s paper, “Born Free: Choosing virginity testing for the good of community kin and nation,” investigates the transformation of virginity testing from the private to the public domain in KwaZulu Natal. Although some have

touted public virginity testing as an AIDS prevention measure, Leak observes that “young women in KwaZulu Natal have transformed local technologies and discourses into a new form of cultural capital to counter the global AIDS Industry (and its attendant technologies and discourses), [to] express Zulu values and culture, and [to] participate in the defining of democratic South Africa” (as summarized by Panel Chair, Patrick Cannon).

Ogugua Ikpeze and Carol Arinze-Umobi’s paper, “‘Agiri’ A Permissive Custom in Nigeria and the Issue of HIV/AIDS Pandemic: The Quest for Cultural Overhaul on Sexuality Rights” delivered at Concurrent Panel II, *Women’s Rights & African Development* insists upon an overhaul of the indigenous custom allowing women “male friends” outside of marriage. Their primary concern is AIDS prevention. In their second paper “The Application of *Nemo Judex in Causa Sua* to customary marriage institutions and divorce in Nigeria” delivered in Concurrent Panel IV, they condemn local traditions of non-judicial divorce that favor males. *Nemo judex in sua causa* is a Latin term denoting Roman principles of natural justice, chiefly, that no person can judge a case in which he or she is a party, which the authors seem to be using ironically to debunk an indigenous Nigerian system of “natural justice” in which husbands are, in effect, the final arbiters in divorce cases while wives’ voices are silenced.

“Kerrite and Collateral: Women’s micro credit in rural Mali” read in Plenary Panel I by Lila Jacobs for Angela Horvath of Ben Gurion University, Israel, investigates the efficacy of internationally financed micro-loans to women in Mali to redress the traditional economic inequities between males and females.

Special Roundtable Discussion on African Family Relations in Sacramento, U.S.A.
8:30-10:20 a.m., Saturday, April 29, 2006.

There is some background to this roundtable discussion moderated by Joy Ezeilo of the Women’s Aid Collective of Enugu, Nigeria.

At a town hall meeting hosted by CAPCR at CSUS, November 12, 2005, various local African community groups and organizations attended to discuss the issue of domestic violence within African immigrant families in the Sacramento area. The lists of “Causes,” “Proposed Solutions,” and “Action Items” produced by that meeting are available from CAPCR. Since then, CAPCR has been assisting the African Family Support Network in setting up a steering committee with the role of developing a plan for implementing key recommendations. As an early step in that process of implementation, Ezeilo opened the informal, roundtable discussion with her own lament for emigrants’ loss of traditional African culture in which an abused wife’s family exacts revenge against an abusive husband. For lack of this recourse, her group promotes zero tolerance legislation against abusers and the constant presence of women’s support groups during abuse counseling, “keeping the meeting focused, despite distractions, upon agencies of intervention.”

Then Ezeilo generously asked each person seated at the roundtable for their recommendations and critiqued each response. All concurred with her emphasis upon agency intervention, although some objected that tough legislation is meaningless without enforcement, and enforcement is “impossible.” Ernest Uwazie reinforced her emphasis upon agency intervention in the US as well as collaboration with US Embassies

in the respective African countries. Yet, he adds that more and larger public meetings on the issue would help “break the culture of silence” that has allowed much domestic abuse to go without discussion, hence unchecked. In that sense, according to Uwazie, domestic abuse among African immigrants is the “elephant in the room” that no one admits is there as they obliviously debate other less immediate issues. Another argued that more attention be paid to anger management, coming to grips with “what makes the elephant in the room freak out!” which delighted everyone. Perhaps he was implying that agency/support group intervention should begin before domestic anger escalates to violence, which Ezeilo supports by way of envisioning a role for the clergy when approached for pre-marital counseling.

By the end of the meeting, the President of the Sacramento Association of Nigerian (Mr. Ken Enuka) and a coordinator of Peace and Conflict Studies Program at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria (Dr. Albert) volunteered to work in collaboration with CAPCR as it further develops strategies for implementing the recommendations of the town hall meeting.

Conclusion

For Plenary Panel IV, meeting Saturday, April 29, 1:00-2:00 p.m., panel chairs concisely summarized their panelists’ papers. Their oral and transcribed summaries were indispensable to the completion of this report. Although few offered supplementary comment or analysis, Patrick Cannon of the CSUS Government Department contributed the following upbeat opinions: “To capture the infusion of the local with the global, academics must recognize the need to develop and enhance promising categories such as hybridization and transboundary formations. Most likely, depending on the issue and country, in some cases the local will coexist with the global . . . while in others altered identities, meanings and practices might lead to unanticipated, new forms of institutions and systems.” The 2007 conference is April 26-28, on the theme of “building a culture of peace in Africa/diaspora: best practices and models.”