

# State University of New York College at Old Westbury

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From the Selected Works of Aubrey W. Bonnett

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## Introduction

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### FOREWORD

One of the major and formidable criticisms of modernity has been that it has not only destroyed tradition, but also left the citizens of the Most Developed Countries (MDCs) shorn of any spiritual anchor or genuine spirituality. Indeed, in many of these countries – the US.A, France, England- one finds an intense and hyper addiction to materialism, and an unwavering commitment to science, as narrowly and strictly defined. There are some exceptions to this, and they lie in the demographic areas of the large and growing immigrant populations who bring with them their commitment to their various and varied traditional faiths and spirituality, often emanating from their forebears' original homelands, existing before the diasporic migrations in Africa, Asia, for example.

In New York and California, where I have studied and written on these retentions – voodoo, espiritismo, candomble, for example- I have been researching ways in which these practices and forms can be interpreted to local authorities, thereby increasing intercultural understanding and ultimately absorption into appropriate social institutions such as religion, legal and medical, for example.

Swami Veda Bharati's monograph can be seen as a major contributor to understanding the strength and source of diasporic spirituality. It looks incisively, but poignantly, at the ways in which the traditions, religions and spirituality of Africa bear strikingly resemblance to the similarly rich spiritual traditions in India. A Hindu monk he has visited Africa, China regularly and is therefore enabled in his attempts to draw on the centripetal ideas (forces) that unite peoples- especially those from Africa(West Africa) and India.

Yoga and meditation, rituals and sacraments, protocols, perceptions and precepts are easily explained, compared and universalized. Swami Bharati informs us of the syncretic nature of many current African traditions ,and compares them with India's own experiences at amalgamating different religious traditions and customs .As such it is a book that is of importance not only to anthropologists, but also to sociologists and those students and scholars interested in religion , cultural issues and controversies, and wider spirituality.

I see some further applications ,especially in “plural societies” such as Guyana, Trinidad Surinam etc., where diasporic African and East Indians are often locked in internecine political and other forms of conflict emanating , I would argue, from their continued and symbolic ‘separateness’. Historically held in place by the military and police forces of colonial metropolitan powers – England, France, Holland, for example- these countries are now trying desperately to form a sense of nationhood, when the sense of unity and cultural understanding never existed wholly, or if it did, only in symbolically, flimsy forms and formats. At times also, purveyors of dissension- at the governmental and private levels- use these existing cultural and religious gulfs to further fragment nation building. Swami Bharati's work is a step in leading to an understanding of the vast sameness which the African and East Indian cultures share, and which, if promulgated

sensibly, would in my opinion, be a good base on which to build and buttress the important task of national unity in these societies.

At a critical, global, geo- political juncture, where India and China are presumed to be poised to occupy major roles as pivotal actors on the world scene , and where the continent of Africa and its many nations seem to be more negatively skewed, the work of Swami Bharati also seem to have some applicability. It reminds us that there is a need for cadres of genuinely committed leaders at all levels that are focused on building intercultural understanding and the principles of universal unity of humankind. It also helps remind these leaders of India, China and Africa that in trying to work towards economic sufficiency and development, they should not abandon their deep spiritual base, as the West seems to have done. The challenge is to balance these contending imperatives over the years.

In my over thirty years in the academy – in three of the largest educational systems in North America, and maybe the world; the City University of New York, State University of New York and the California State University- as a professor, college dean, and vice president of academic affairs, I have found few books which are as simply written and illuminating culturally. I recommend it highly

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