A three-day international conference, “Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity” jointly hosted by the African-American and African Studies Program, the Religious Studies Program and the Davis Humanities Institute, was held at the University of California, Davis, March 28-31, 1996. The conference attracted large audiences of faculty, students and interested public from all over the USA. Forty distinguished scholars from fourteen countries in Asia, Europe, the USA, Latin America and Africa explored a number of issues. Foremost among the concerns were the relationship between indigenous religious traditions and modernity and the status of indigenous religions in the academic study of religions.

The foundation of the international conference dates back to 1992 when the American Academy of Religion (AAR) approved the creation of a consultation on indigenous religious traditions. The consultation, now accorded group status in the AAR, has sponsored ongoing analyses of the neglect of indigenous religions in the Academy. Hidden away in the simple phrase “indigenous religious traditions” is a broad spectrum of cultures. These include Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, Hawaiians, Tribal peoples in India, and Africans spread across the globe. Every continent is covered by this term. Yet, these massive populations and distinctive histories find little place in the Academy. The first overarching goal of the Davis conference was to further the discussion begun in 1992 by extending discussion to all areas where indigenous religions form a strong presence. The second goal was to enhance the understanding of indigenous traditions around the world and to make a compelling case for the integration of indigenous religions, their concerns and perspectives into teaching.
and research in religious studies in the USA as well as other parts of the world.

The conference was opened at the Native American C.N. Gorman Museum with welcoming speeches by Provost Robert Grey and the Dean of Humanities, Arts and Culture, Kern Holoman. The University’s Black Repertoire Dance Troupe, choreographed by Bobbie Wynn Bolden, staged a performance set in the context of Trinidad’s and Barbados’ Spiritual Baptist traditions, symbolizing a “synthesis” of Afro-Caribbean indigenous and Christian symbols. This extraordinary performance drew in our guests and set the tone for the conference presentations which began that evening in the Memorial Union Building.

To ensure that the central theme of the conference was treated from many points of view, the sessions progressed from historical issues to ideological issues, to cross-cultural perspectives on indigenous religions’ responses to modernity, to the prospects for the study and teaching of indigenous religions in the Academy. Thirty papers were presented in eight sessions. Following are summaries of the central issues in the papers, and then some concluding remarks from the exchanges and debates that ensued through the course of the conference.

The plenary session, entitled “Perspectives of Indigenous Religions in the History of Religions,” consisted of four speakers. The first speaker, Charles Long (University of California, Santa Barbara), in his paper “A Post-Colonial Meaning of Religions: Some Reflections from the Indigenous World,” confronted the language problems that underlay the central core of the discussions on indigenous traditions, especially the power structures reflected in that language. He observed that the very term adopted for the conference theme, “indigenous,” which means in its conventional sense “home,” recalls the structure of colonial power and colonial projects which took place away from the colonizers own homes. Long also observed that history as we have it today does not reflect the truth about the relationships and encounters between the indigenous peoples and the colonizers. He suggested the need for an “archeology of knowledge” with re-