

Programme Point Sud 2020
The Grammar of the Spirit World in Pentecostalized Africa
5th-9th September, University of Ghana, Legon

Conveners

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Abstract

References to the spirit world are an integral part of life in many African contexts. Even scholars who personally would never speak of such a spirit world, cannot hope to give a fair account of what is going on in Africa without in one way or another acknowledging the importance of these references to a spirit world. During this workshop we want to bring together anthropologists, philosophers, theologians and other scholars to re-examine the kind of reality people in African contexts take the spirit world to have. What does it mean for them to say that spirits are real or real persons? Why do they not count them in the number of inhabitants in a particular village? Why are they not surprised if their white visitors do not see them? Do they mean something different by real in this case?

Such questions are not particular to African contexts. In Western philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein challenged assumptions about the relationship between language and reality. The conjecture of this workshop is that Wittgenstein's approach might stimulate reflections about the kind of reality of the spirit world in African contexts as well – no longer a realm of ephemeral entities but of responses to experiences of a world full of contingency, uncertainty and chance. It is not a workshop about Wittgenstein, but Wittgensteinian questions will be used to elicit knowledge from and about Africa.

All participants to this workshop will be asked to reflect in their papers upon the grammar of the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa as they have encountered it in their research, and upon the usefulness of such a grammatical approach in the study of Africa. As sub-themes we will look at spiritual power, healing, evil spirits and communities.