

Workshop Program Point Sud 2021

Religious Infrastructures: from Africa and Beyond

3-9 January 2022

Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon

Conveners

Dr. Yanti Martina Hoelzchen, Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, Germany

Dr. Benjamin Kirby, Centre for African Studies / Centre for Religion and Public Life, University of Leeds, Great Britain

Dr. Genevieve Nrenzah, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

Abstract

Infrastructure is conventionally defined as the background “scaffolding” that makes social and economic activity – even life itself – possible. In recent years, the multi-disciplinary “infrastructure turn” has sought to foreground the social work that infrastructures do by constituting relations and environments (Fredericks 2018; Guma 2020; Larkin 2008; Melly 2017; Simone 2004). This literature generates new opportunities to “think infrastructurally” (Chu 2014) about religion and to “think religiously” about infrastructure.

Taking up these questions, this conference creates an interface between the emerging literature on infrastructure on the one hand, and recent material studies of religion on the other (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Benyah 2020; Ibrahim 2017; Katsaura 2017; Meyer 2015). We note that both research trajectories have been particularly invigorated by studies that are empirically grounded in African contexts. Indeed, this conference takes the African continent as a vital point of departure for exploring questions of religious infrastructure – both as a site from which to subvert Eurocentric frameworks of analysis, and as a “frontier” of religious and infrastructural transformation that speaks to emerging global processes and planetary futures (Mbembe 2021).

The conference has two key aims. The first is to bring together mid to early career scholars and advanced doctoral candidates from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to elaborate concepts of religious infrastructure. In doing so, we seek to open up new ways of thinking about both religion and infrastructure. The second aim is to inaugurate an international research network which will go on to build a broader research agenda around religious infrastructure by developing publications and grant applications, among other activities.

This five-day conference is hosted and co-organised by the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Accra. Founded in 1961, IAS is an internationally recognised centre for interdisciplinary research into African contexts, with particular expertise in the study of religion. The conference will feature a “mobile panel” and a day excursion, offering participants the opportunity to explore the religious and infrastructural lives of Accra and the surrounding region in conversation with residents and practitioners.

Key questions that the conference will explore include: How do religious practitioners assemble, maintain, and relate to different infrastructural arrangements – both “tangible” (e.g. electrical grids, transport networks, education systems) and “intangible” (e.g. financial services, legal frameworks, forms of sociality)? How do religious infrastructures contribute to the making of everyday lives, moral communities, and shared habitats? How do different kinds of infrastructural arrangements – whether religiously coded (e.g. Akan, Catholic, Sufi) or otherwise – intersect or circumvent one another? How do religious infrastructures act as grounds of contestation, instruments of governance, or vehicles for articulating claims? In turn, how might they make possible conditions of mutuality, security, habitation – even survival? What kind of practices, moralities, sentiments, and aspirations do religious infrastructures elicit or enable? How do infrastructures connect religious practitioners with spiritual realities, (ancestral) pasts, and imagined futures? What might be better apprehended by adopting religious infrastructure as an analytic lens or unit of analysis, and what might this obscure?