



## Program Point Sud 2016

# Imagineries of Affliction, Healing and Medicine: Sickness and the Representation of Africa 20-24 September 2016 Stellenbosch Report



## 1. Conveners

Prof Rose Marie Beck, Linguistics and Literature, University of Leipzig

Prof Abdallah Daar, Public Health, University of Toronto

Prof Birgit Meyer, Religious Studies, University of Utrecht

Prof Joseph Tonda, Sociology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville

## 2. Themes and Objectives

The conference explored the politics and aesthetics of world-making in, and with regard to, Africa, by focusing on affliction and healing as root metaphors for the representation of Africa. The focus on affliction, sickness, healing and medicine brings together in innovative ways the (sociological, anthropological) study of medicine and religion in Africa. Just as medicine, so is religion, a highly politicized arena characterized by ongoing and power-oriented negotiations that have at their core fundamental questions about humanity, sociability and the worth of life. The notion of imaginaries as socially authorized reality producing formations of collective representations allows to grasp how medical, religious and medico-religious practices are shaped by, and evoking historically situated, socially grounded and context specific practices of imagination. In this sense, imaginaries create spaces of opportunities and restrictions, as well as arenas for negotiation.

‘Affliction and healing’ is reflexive of the heterogeneity of our topic and opens it up to other phenomena including but also transcending biomedicine, religion, politics and popular culture. Looking at imaginaries around ‘affliction and healing’ affords us to connect to broader narratives, for example (and significantly) of ir/rationality, science and legitimacy, but also the body and how life matters. To achieve this goal the conference brings together scholars from different fields, disciplines, conceptual approaches/methodologies and areas: medicine and public health, medical anthropology and sociology, media studies, the study of languages, of religion, of science and technology. The conference is part of a larger critique of knowledge production and seeks to learn from and contribute to the deployment of a critical ‘Theory from the South’. The conference was organized around six topics:

I) Imaginaries of Africa via images of sickness. As a foundation for further debates it is indispensable to trace and understand continuities and changes from knowledge about and the representation of malaria, sleeping sickness and hygiene – arguably the most prominent themes in colonial health interventions – in colonial texts and visual materials to current visualization of Tuberculosis, HIV, Ebola and other diseases.

II) Mediality of imaginaries. Here we look at different media and their specific affordances, infrastructures of spread and how they generate different kinds of local and global publics. In that way transformations and continuities of certain images of Africa can be made visible.

III) Situatedness of imaginaries. This focus concentrates on the situatedness of imaginaries as grounded in the very existential experience of affliction and healing, taking into account in broader political-cultural contexts, the imagination of Africa in the world, in science, but also

of the (post)colonial world in Africa. This allows for connections to related narratives and logics, for example of rationality, witchcraft or the Holy Spirit.

IV) Contestations and turning points. We set into focus tensions between partly overlapping, partly competing and clashing imaginaries and experiences. The central concern here is to study in detail not only how and why stereotypes are aligned with hegemonial imaginaries, but also to explore the conditions under which alternative imaginaries arise, that may operate as subversive counter-narratives but could also be partly incorporated into dominant ones.

V) Connectivities. Finally, taking all imaginaries together, we explore common elements and confluences in the ways in which sickness is expressed via bodies, words and images, paying particular attention to the ways in which these figurations move across otherwise divergent imaginaries. Spotting transfigurations will allow us to grasp the complex connectivities between divergent imaginaries.

### **3. Methodology and Results**

The workshop comprised presentations mostly in the mornings, work and discussion on various media (film, digitalized/new media), daily summarizing commentaries by (mostly) young scholars, and a half-day excursion to Kayamandi with visits to medical and (medico) religious institutions. Two participants were not able to come due to political unrest in their home countries (Gabon). The workshop was further overshadowed by local and national student protests, which, while not interfering with the smooth course of the workshop, led to an intensive debate about academe in general and the excursion to Kayamandi in particular (see below).

For the organization of the program we were quite successful at pairing up papers that were able to speak to each other – both in complementing and/or confronting ways – and thus spark comments and discussion from the panel. Birgit Meyer gave a conceptual input at the outset of the workshop on the notion of imaginaries which served as a common starting point for all further discussions. Of the pairs that turned out to speak well to each other and contributed to the heterogeneity and at the same time integration of the workshop topic were those of Tonda/Geschiere on the politics of/and witchcraft, Beck/Lafontaine about medical technologies as producers of dystopic imaginaries of the human, Vierke/Swartz, Githaiga, Vergunst who spoke about the visibility/visuality of imaginaries of disablement, Senah/Lambertz who raised the topic of how science and medicine interact, Babongui-Mba/Medinat/Kruisbergen on possession, insanity and extremism, Anthonissen/Theron on imaginaries of HIV/AIDS as expressed by patients through their linguistic behavior. Other papers were interesting and intellectually rewarding in themselves, for example, Pentecoste on the first 1000 days of childhood as technology of social control, Kirsch on the fragmentation of self and the utopia of a consistent identity, Cousins with a thick analysis on the stomach as centre of a capacity to resist and be resilient, Khenti's account of the racialization of masculinity in Canada, Jethro on identity formation as a form of healing in a Khoisan context in contemporary South Africa, or a very interesting comparison of a Muslim and a Christian group in Nigeria and how they drew on their religious and social background to respond to Ebola by Ibrahim.

The afternoons were at least partly dedicated to concrete media work, featuring (Tuesday) a film on medical pluralism and the agency of the afflicted in Ghana in which two participants were involved (Senah, Hunt), a screening of Jean Rouch's film *Les Maîtres Fous* (Wednesday) in which colonialism itself appears as an affliction. With her contribution Nancy Hunt reminded us of the fascinating work with online sources (Friday). Because two papers were cancelled (see above) we had invited Dr. Qubuda, a specialist of "Africetual Health Sciences"<sup>1</sup>, for an interview on Saturday morning. We were interested in understanding more on the synthesis of medical, religious interpretations of health and affliction that we came to recognize as emerging at the intersection of our topic. Unfortunately Dr. Qubuda did not come. We can only speculate why this was so, maybe a reflection of the still felt (postcolonial) hierarchies of universal and local/particularistic knowledge.

Every day was summarized by two discussants: Tuesday by Abdallah Daar and Joseph Tonda, Wednesday Peter Lambertz and Duane Jethro, Friday by Cordille-Verdia Babongui-Mba and Michelle Pentecoste. Saturday the plenary contributed each to the summary of the conference.

Thursday afternoon was reserved for an excursion whose planning turned out to be quite complex due, amongst others, to the current situation at South African universities and sensitivities attached to student protests and debates around the "decolonization of knowledge", the construction of the Other in particular by anthropology and Theory from the South. The excursion was planned and implemented under the support of Dr. Jantje Xaba, sociologist, and Dr. Thomas Cousins, anthropologist, both from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch, who were crucial for our understanding of the current South African context. In order to make the transition from "white", academic Stellenbosch to the township somatically accessible, we drove to Eikestad Mall, a transitional space between the two spheres and walked from the upper side to the lower side where we then were picked up by buses to be taken to Kayamandi. There we visited Legacy Kayamandi, a NGO specialized in HIV/AIDS prevention for children,<sup>2</sup> and a church, St. John's, renowned for its healing practices. We had the opportunity to speak to one of the employees of Legacy and one of the senior members of the church. A third stop at a local healer's practice had to be cancelled because we were expected at Solms Delta for a guided tour through their museum and wine tasting. Solms Delta is renowned for its social commitment to its farm workers and the history of slavery and oppression at the Cape. This outing was followed by a fantastic dinner at Solms Delta, after which we were taken back to Stellenbosch.

Two important outcomes of the workshop shall be mentioned here.

1. Once again the capacity of the Programme Point Sud to bring together in very productive ways highly diverse topics, disciplines and people who otherwise would probably not have met and spoken to each other and each others' topics. Unfortunately the contribution of medicine 'proper' remained somewhat marginal due to the fact that one of the conveners, Prof. Abdallah Daar, had other commitments to follow during part of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/DrThozamileQubuda>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.legacykayamandi.org>

the week. Nevertheless, his presence at the workshop was highly appreciated and his input on the first day substantial.

2. The lens of imaginaries on the one and the combination of the study of medicine and religion on the other hand was felt:
  - a) To allow for a new perspective on health and affliction that set into focus that medicine and religion in many contexts are hard to distinguish. In the spirit of decolonizing trends in science or the current debates of writing or looking at the world from a Southern perspective, at the end of the week we arrived, consequently at the (unfortunately missed) interview with Dr. Qubuda. A novel perspective on medicine and religion, affliction and healing could be obtained by analyzing representations of Africa through the eyes of such practices as those for which Dr. Qubuda stands.
  - b) Interestingly, to stop short at discussions about the human being itself, despite the fact that in medicine and religion it is precisely the human being that is at stake. We kept returning to this point at several occasions, but did not know how to deal with this deadlock. It would certainly be worth returning to the question of essentialization of the human being and its consequences.

#### **4. Sustainability of the Event**

Participants expressed a strong interest in a follow-up workshop, precisely because for the fact that it not only spanned the disciplines but also opened up a new field at the intersection of the anthropological study of medicine and religion.

Currently we explore the possibility of a joint publication of the proceedings, edited by Rose Marie Beck, Peter Lambertz and Birgit Meyer, publication is planned for 2018.

As this workshop was organized by members of the steering committee (Beck, Meyer) together with partners from the Programme Point Sud network (Tonda, Lategan) there is a strong incentive to further develop this highly promising topic into a research project. The publication of the proceedings will provide the background for the development of such a joint research project.

## 5. Participants

1. Medinat Abdulazeez M.A. Political Science, Max Planck Institute, Halle
2. Dr Faber M. Ngoma Adete Sociology, Université Omar Bongo, Libreville
3. Prof Christine Anthonissen Linguistics, Stellenbosch University
4. Prof Rose Marie Beck African Languages, University of Leipzig
5. Dr Thomas Cousins Anthropology, Stellenbosch University
6. Prof Abdallah Daar Medicine, University of Toronto
7. Prof Peter Geschiere Anthropology, University of Amsterdam
8. Dr Jennifer Githaiga Psychology, Stellenbosch University
9. Prof Nancy Hunt History, University of Florida
10. Murtala Ibrahim M.A. Religious Studies, Anthropology, Graduate School Berlin
11. Dr Duane Jethro Anthropology, University of Cape Town
12. Prof Akwatu Khenti Medicine, Global Health, University of Toronto
13. Prof Thomas Kirsch Anthropology, University of Konstanz
14. Johanneke Kroesbergen M.A. Religious Studies, Justo Mwale University, Lusaka
15. Prof Celine Lafontaine Sociology, University of Montreal
16. Dr Peter Lambertz History, Religion, African Studies, ZMO Berlin
17. Cordille V. B. Mba M.A. EHESS/IMAF, Paris
18. Prof Birgit Meyer Religious Studies, University of Utrecht
19. Leandri O'Callaghan M.A. Anthropology, Stellenbosch University
20. Michelle Pentecoste M.A. Medicine, Medical Anthropology, University of Oxford
21. Prof Deborah Posel Anthropology, UCT, Cape Town
22. Prof Kojo Senah Medical Sociology, Accra, Ghana College of Nurses and Midwives
23. Prof Leslie Swartz Psychology, Stellenbosch University
24. Dr Janina Theron Linguistics, Stellenbosch University
25. Prof Joseph Tonda Sociology, Université Omar Bongo, Libreville
26. Dr Richard Vergunst Psychology, Stellenbosch University
27. Dr Ulf Vierke Director of Iwalewa Haus Bayreuth, University of Bayreuth
28. Lameck Zingano M.A. Anthropology, Carleton University Ottawa