Call for papers

The grammar of the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa
Workshop as part of the *Programme Point Sud 2020*

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. Academic studies of what people in Africa say about the spirit world – from anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, theology or other fields – can be divided into four groups, based on their position concerning the existence of this spiritual realm. Whether one discusses witchcraft, ancestors, or the importance of the man of God, scholars use one of the following presuppositions:

1. the spirit world is real;
2. there is no spirit world, ideas about the spirit world are mere superstitions, that will – or, at least, should – fade away;
3. the spirit world could be real or not, and further research will tell us what is real and what is not (– this position is not very common in international scholarship about Africa, but does have a presence within African academia);
4. it does not matter whether the spiritual realities are real, what matters is that people believe that they are real, and, therefore, they are real in their consequences in social, political, economic and other respects – these consequences can be investigated.

Despite the wide range of research covered by these different positions, one assumption is shared by all of them. Scholars from all four positions assume to know what it is for the spirit world to be real or be taken to be real. Even the last position, that intends to leave the question of reality aside, still assumes to know what it is for the people they are investigating to believe that a spirit world exists.

During this workshop we wish to challenge – or, at least, investigate – this assumption. 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.

To focus the discussions we will concentrate on references to a spiritual realm in contemporary Africa. The choice for African Pentecostalized Christianity is a pragmatic one: the majority religion of Sub-Saharan Africa is Christianity, and across all denominations this Christianity has been highly influenced by Neo-Pentecostal practices and ideas. Scholars focusing on other denominations or faiths are invited to participate in the workshop as well – providing broader and comparative perspectives e.g. on Islam in Africa as well as African traditional religions.

The prevalence of concepts such as the spirit world, powers, mystical causality and holism within African religions makes it an interesting case to study references to the spirit world. The Wittgensteinian concept of 'grammar' will be used as a lens to explore what it means to speak of a spirit world. Not all of the participants will be familiar with Wittgenstein or his concept of grammar, but this does not matter, since it is merely the occasion to evoke

novel, relevant and deepened discussions about what is at stake in the many references to the spirit world in the African context. Even if someone has never focussed on Wittgenstein or learning processes or education, it might still be very helpful to reflect upon how one learned to use the spiritual concepts in one's area of study, and what this shows about the kind of reality involved. The goal is an in-depth discussion of the African perspective itself as it can be clarified through a confrontation with the following Wittgensteinian questions, interpreted in a broad way:

1. How do people learn to speak of the spirit world within African Pentecostalized Christianity (and other African religions)? How are children, converts or anthropologists taught to speak of spirits? How do objects and images play a role here? And what does this show about the kind of reality attached to it?
2. How do people check whether someone – a child, a convert, an anthropologist – has learned to speak of the spirit world correctly within African Pentecostalized Christianity (and other African religions)? And what does this show about the kind of reality attached to it?
3. What kind of conflicts arise about references to the spirit world within African Pentecostalized Christianity (and other African religions) – within one ministry, between different ministries, or between one ministry and non-believers – and how are these conflicts settled? What kind of arguments carry weight in such debates? And what does this show about the kind of reality attached to it, within religious settings, but also in contexts such as work, family life, or sickness?

Both the philosopher who investigates communitarism in Africa, and the anthropologist who investigates testimonies about Satanism did learn to speak of the spirit world in a particular way, and encountered conflicts that related to the spirit world in their own specific research contexts, for example. By focussing on such trans-disciplinary questions, scholars from different disciplines, each with their own methodologies and perspectives, can, nonetheless, engage in a meaningful and fruitful dialogue that can impact each of the disciplines in its own way. Papers for this workshop are expected to reflect upon someone's already existing research concerning and other experiences related to the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa, reconsidering it by focussing upon the grammar of the spirit world.

The five sub-themes we have in mind are:
1. The grammar of spiritual power and anointing
2. The grammar of spiritual healing
3. The grammar of evil spirits and witchcraft
4. The grammar of the spirit world in communities
5. A general perspective on the grammar of the spirit world

Selected papers from the conference shall be published in a peer-reviewed book with an international publishing house.

We invite scholars working in areas related to the theme of this workshop to submit an abstract of about **500 words** to hermen.kroesbergen@gmail.com by **14 March 2020**.

Costs for transportation and accommodation for all participants will be borne by the organizers.
Conference venue: Institute for African Studies, University of Ghana,
**   Legon, Accra, Ghana**
Conference time: 5-9 September 2020