



Spirit and Sentiment: Affective Trajectories of Religious Being in Urban Africa

**International Conference of the Research Network on Religion, AIDS and Social
Transformation in Africa (RASTA)**

Date: 28-30 May 2015

Venue: Freie Universität Berlin

With keynote speeches by:

- Prof. Dr. Filip de Boeck, University of Leuven
- Prof. Dr. AbdouMaliq Simone, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Call for papers: Experiences and social practices of people living in urban Africa are powerfully shaped by the dynamics of affect and emotion. Moving into and residing in the vital and (economically, ethnically, socially) diverse urban centers of the continent often triggers, and is driven by, states of anxiety, insecurity and fear, as well as feelings of excitement and hope, e.g. for a better life and socio-economic liberation. In addition, urban centers, and the opportunities and risks that living in them implies, provide space for sensations of pleasure, love, care and intimacy, but also experiences of suffering, alienation and emotional drama.

Many of these emotional and affective dynamics are engendered by the particular characteristics that have shaped urban life in and beyond Africa over the last decades; including the presence of violence and crime in urban dwellings; high levels of unemployment, poverty and epidemic illness; the promises, desires and actual pains induced by neoliberal, market-oriented reforms; along with the proliferation of artistic and aesthetic forms in urban centers. They have been exacerbated further in the context of HIV/AIDS and

urban violence where cities have become signifiers not only as sites of death and bereavement, as exemplified by Mbembe's notion of "necropolitics" and de Boeck's writings on the "invisible city" and young people's social and moral imaginaries in Kinshasa (2004). Cities have also become places of hope and possible future(s) where – due to the existing infrastructure and higher degrees of anonymity – antiretroviral medication was available first and where people started to refashion their lives and emotional selves around – as well as beyond – the rigid frameworks of the emerging treatment regimes. Thus, as the case of HIV/AIDS illustrates, moving into and residing in urban settings may imply the reorganization of social relations and individual subjectivities, thereby giving rise to new understandings and practices of citizenship, self and personhood, but also sensations of marginality and exclusion and the anxieties of leading a "good life" in morally, socially, politically and spiritually "corrupt" environments.

This conference focuses on the multiple articulations between the wide array of affective and emotional states that living in and beyond urban Africa implies, on the one hand, and religious practices and ideas present in African cities and that may impact on the former, on the other. While a further goal of the conference is to establish a link between these various domains and HIV/AIDS, this is not an obligatory requirement for paper submissions. In a fundamental sense, the emotional and affective dynamics in urban Africa – and the social, political and material configurations that sustain (or are sustained by) them – are bound up with religion, its politics of collective aspirations and presence in material public space, and its material practices: First, religious ideas and practices offer affective regimes that regulate the hermeneutics of religious selves; second, religion allows people to encode their emotional states in religious and/or spiritual terms that may shape their maps of meaning and guide their movements; third, it supplies affective forms of belonging that are often simultaneously localized and transnational and thus forge new notions of emplacement; fourth, it provides ritual spaces for catharsis, peace and elation – hence an outlet for the discord and anxiety of city life – but religious groups and rituals may also foster aggression towards those considered outside their moral order; and fifth, religious communities often provide concrete material, emotional and organizational support and care to those in need and danger.

We are particularly interested in contributions from anthropology, sociology, political science, urban studies, history, geography, and religious studies that are based on thorough empirical research and that highlight not only how religious idioms, practices and structures channel and articulate emotional and affective states, but also how they foment emotions and affect in their own way (e.g., in ritual and prayer, religious group formation and mass mobilization, and religious engagements with political and moral issues in contemporary society). We expect presenters to engage with the analytical key concepts of the conference, i.e. the notions of affect, emotion and the urban. In our view, the notion of sentiment is helpful in defining distinctive ways of moral and emotional being in specific communities (Throop 2012) which cultivate ethical lives in times of social transformation and "moral breakdown" (Zigon 2007) and which can also be inscribed in forms of humanitarian and state governance (Fassin 2011). Also, engaging analytically with urban space may benefit from the notion of

scale (Brenner 2001) that addresses the hierarchical arrangements of urban centers in an interconnected world as well as the internal diversity of urban space with its “hot spots” and “dead” zones (van Dijk 2011). Furthermore, we consider cities as spaces of intensification (Debord 1977) which are configured around spatial mobilities, risks and opportunities. Papers can address these issues from the perspective of dominant traditions (Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion) – or actors who engage with their ideas, practices and everyday articulations in the flourishing religious markets and popular sectors of African cities –, religious minorities, and other, site-specific scenarios of religious diversity both on the continent and in the African diaspora.

Paper submissions may cover one or several of the following themes:

- African Cities as epistemological laboratories: medicine, faith and enchantment
- Insecurity, health and healing
- Emotionality of religious politics in urban Africa and the mobilization of religious sentiment in urban governance
- The manifestation of religious sentiment in urban art and media (song, graffiti, theatre, TV)
- Emotionality, affect and religious engagements with public space
- Anxieties, hopes and affect in interreligious encounters
- Sentiment and the formation of religious personhood in and beyond institutional settings
- Intimacy, love and care in religious and family domains
- The material as well as immaterial practices of care and support that enable the navigation of the urban in spiritual, emotional and material ways.

Please submit your abstracts of 250-300 words to:

rasta.berlin.conference2015[at]gmail.com

The deadline for applications is September 30, 2014. Participants will be informed about the acceptance or non-acceptance of their papers by mid- to end of October. Accepted speakers will be expected to submit their paper (4-5000 words) by April 20, 2015 for pre-circulation among all conference participants.

Scholarships: Several travel and accommodation fellowships are available for select participants. African scholars will be prioritized in selection, though we also invite others to apply whose participation would be dependent on financial support. Please write a 500 word motivation for funding applications, outlining your reasons for the application, whether you require full or partial funding, and your expected travel costs. Please include also a short CV of no more than 2 pages.

Organizing Team:

- Hansjörg Dilger (Freie Universität Berlin, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology)

- Astrid Bochow (Georg-August University Göttingen, Institute for Cultural and Social Anthropology)
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- Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (African Center for Migration and Society, Wits University)

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