RELIGIOUS INFRA STRUCTURE

From Africa & beyond

A "DFG-Programme Point Sud" Conference

6-10 JUNE 2023

Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon

Convened by Yanti Hölzchen + Benjamin Kirby + Genevieve Nrenzah

For further details about participation, please email hoelzchen[at]cof.uni-tuebingen.de

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Call for Papers

Religious Infrastructure
from Africa and beyond

June 6–10, 2023
Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon

A conference of the "Programme Point Sud", funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) in collaboration with the Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main

Conveners

Dr Yanti Martina Hölzchen, Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt / College of Fellows, University of Tübingen, Germany

Professor Benjamin Kirby, Study of Religion, University of Bayreuth, Germany

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

Conference theme

In this conference, we invite researchers from a range of disciplines to "think infrastructurally" (Chu 2014) about religion and to "think religiously" about infrastructure. Under the rubric of "religious infrastructure", we set out to create an interface between two important research trajectories in recent years: the "material turn" in the study of religion and the multidisciplinary "infrastructure turn". Considered together, these research trajectories both seek to subvert the same conceptual binaries that organise how their respective units of analysis are conventionally apprehended (e.g., cultural-material, social-technical, intangible-tangible). Accordingly, some researchers have sought to emphasise the material and technological dimensions of religious phenomena (e.g., Fredericks 2018; Handman 2017; Schwenkel 2017; Ukah 2016; Walker 2019), while others have highlighted the cultural and semiotic dimensions of infrastructural phenomena (e.g., Appel et al. 2018, Fredericks 2018; Larkin 2013; Von Schnitzler 2016). In addition, more attention has been directed to the sensory, imaginative, and affective workings of religious and infrastructural ensembles alike, as well as their capacity to fashion particular kinds of subjects, experiences, and forms of sociality. This conference capitalises on these multidisciplinary resonances, experimenting with the notion of religious infrastructure to generate new sites of empirical inquiry and conceptual elaboration for the study of religion and infrastructure alike.

Conference scope

In this conference, we propose a notion of religious infrastructure that entails two key conceptual manoeuvres:

(1) We take infrastructures to be ensembles of integrated parts—technical, material, social, etc.—that act as *enabling arrangements*. More specifically, they are arrangements that take on the role of supporting or making possible certain activities

and relations across different sites and instances. Here, we are interested not only in prototypical infrastructures (e.g., electrical grids, pipelines, railways, roads, sewerage), but also less tangible arrangements (e.g., algorithmic systems, financial services, broadband internet networks, legal frameworks, modes of knowledge production and expertise). Indeed, building on recent urban studies, we take seriously the fact that all manner of things can participate in the performance of infrastructural operations, from makeshift vending kiosks (Guma 2020) to oysters (Wakefield 2020)—and, moreover, that all manner of things can be fruitfully conceptualised as an infrastructural operation (e.g., Falls 2017 on assemblages of breast milk sharing).

(2) We take "religious infrastructures" to be infrastructural arrangements or operations that are in some way *religiously marked*. They may be marked using reference points associated with a specific religious tradition (e.g., indigenous religious traditions, Sikh traditions), a religious denomination or movement (e.g., Pentecostalism, Salafism), or a particular spiritual formation (e.g., "the occult") (Kirby and Hölzchen, forthcoming).

This conference invites participants to engage with diverse manifestations of religious infrastructure. On the one hand, we are interested in contributions that engage with what we call "infrastructures *of* religion" and "infrastructures *for* religion": enabling arrangements that either *belong* to a given religious organisation or community, or which *support* explicitly "religious" activities. These categories can include (but need not be restricted to) familiar objects of analysis for researchers of religion, including buildings and facilities. However, an infrastructural approach invites us to conceptualise them anew: to apprehend them as both social *and* technical ensembles, the components and operations of which extend across multiple sites and instances (Nrenzah, forthcoming). On the other hand, we are also interested in contributions that engage with practices and arrangements that do not belong to a religious group or support religious activities, but that can still be fruitfully conceptualised through the lens of religious infrastructure. For instance, these might explore:

- Cases where religiously unmarked infrastructures enable religiously marked practices and relations. e.g., social media algorithms that are harnessed by religious actors to disseminate messaging and amass followers (Ibrahim, forthcoming).
- Cases where infrastructural configurations are religiously marked in a particular way, while shaping the lives of people who do not identify with this religious marker. e.g., clinics and schools overseen by religious groups that enable the delivery of public health and education services (Oosterbaan and Machado 2020; Hölzchen 2018).
- Cases where religiously marked configurations support activities that are not religiously marked, nor exclusively practiced by a single religious group. e.g., where a religious configuration facilitates the trading activities of religiously diverse entrepreneurs (Kirby 2020).
- Cases where prototypical infrastructures are ascribed or take on certain religious functions or qualities which were not intended by those that govern the infrastructure in question, e.g., telecommunications networks that are perceived to facilitate the movements of harmful spiritual forces (Desplat, forthcoming).

Conference objectives

This conference is intended to facilitate discussion among researchers whose work examines religion or infrastructure. The conference's agenda therefore cuts across two disciplinary and empirical axes: (1) studies of religion which apply an infrastructural lens to religious phenomena, showcasing how religiously marked arrangements mutually facilitate, transform, and depend on broader landscapes of action and relation; and (2) work on infrastructure that

highlights the religious lives of (more prototypical) infrastructural apparatuses, investigating the religious operations and aspirations that these enable. In doing so, we seek to illuminate instances where religiously marked and unmarked configurations and domains of practice become mutually entangled.

The conference invites scholars of infrastructure to attend to religious matters that may have thus far not featured prominently in their research. Simultaneously, it also seeks to generate new sites of empirical inquiry for studying religion beyond conventional candidates (e.g., practitioners, institutions), or indeed the artifacts and devices that often appear in material studies of religion. Again, this does not mean excluding, for instance, individual religious practitioners or buildings from our analyses, but rather asking how they form part of ensembles that enact or are transformed by infrastructural operations across different sites and instances. Doing so, we find, creates novel entry points for understanding the formation of religious subjectivities, styles, and socialities, as well as dynamics of inter-religious contestation and cooperation.

Guiding questions and subthemes

These issues will be explored during a five-day conference structured around three overlapping themes that are characteristic of religious infrastructures and how they shape everyday life and experience: relationality, multiplicity, and governance. While each theme zooms in on specific dynamics at the interface of religion and infrastructure, they all call participants to ask a series of fundamental questions about their infrastructural units of analysis: What kinds of practices or relations do they shape or make possible? Are these configurations or their operations religiously marked, and if so, how? Which people and settings are affected by their operations and how?

Relationality

Infrastructures constitute and transform webs of relations. They are crucial to the making of collective life at large by constituting and reconfiguring everyday forms of (inter)action and lived experience, often in ways that diverge from their ostensible function (Bowker and Star 2000; Collier et al. 2016; Morita 2017). *Relationality* thus concerns itself with the (co-)constitutive and transformative capacities of religious infrastructure and addresses questions such as: How do religious practitioners assemble, maintain, and relate to different infrastructural arrangements such as transport networks, education systems, financial services, legal frameworks? 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 contribute to the making of everyday lives, moral communities, and shared habitats? In turn, how might they make possible aspirations or conditions of mutuality, security, and habitation? How do infrastructures connect religious practitioners with spiritual realities, (ancestral) pasts, and imagined futures?

Multiplicity

In speaking to the multiplicity of religious infrastructures, we are variously interested in (1) the distinct infrastructural apparatuses devised by different religious (sub-)groups; (2) how these are multiply operationalised at different instances and sites (local, translocal, and global); and (3) the forms of plurality that these infrastructures afford. We are also interested in how distinct infrastructures which are assembled by (or perceived to "belong" to) different religious groups variously intersect with and rub up against one another. In religiously plural settings, how do these infrastructures serve as sites or vehicles of contestation and differentiation between different groups?

Concurrently, how might infrastructures enable less antagonistic encounters between religious groups, revealing more implicit dynamics of cooperation and mutual recognition (Janson/Meyer 2016; Katsaura 2018; Kirby/Sibanda/Charway 2021; Larkin 2016)?

Governance
This theme explores how the lives of religious infrastructures are entangled with political dynamics and forms of ordering. How do political actors mobilise, assemble, or dismantle religious infrastructures in pursuit of political ends? How are religious infrastructures designed or appropriated as a means to expand the influence of specific traditions, e.g., Pentecostal Christianity or reformist Islam, and transform how these are practiced (Hölzchen 2018; f.c.)? How do religious infrastructures factor into different efforts to obtain and exercise authority, both within and beyond religiously marked domains? How do different legal frameworks (reciprocally) influence the configuration, expansion, and (in)visibility of religious infrastructures (Burchardt 2020)? How do religious infrastructures (re)produce distributional inequalities and uneven experiences of marginality and exclusion?

Exploring religious infrastructures in and from Africa
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). Indeed, the research trajectories informing our proposed notion of "religious infrastructure" have been particularly invigorated by studies that are empirically grounded in African contexts. Similarly, we seek to investigate religious infrastructure through studies speaking *with* and *from* different African contexts, while also inviting contributions which highlight how certain religious infrastructures reach beyond the African continent, tracing their translocal extensions and entanglements.

Conference programme and further proceedings
This five-day conference is hosted and co-organised by the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon. The conference will be structured into three panels corresponding with the above introduced themes. It will also feature a "mobile panel" and excursion, offering participants the opportunity to explore the religious and infrastructural lives of Accra and the surrounding region in conversation with residents and practitioners. The conference discussions will be accompanied by four keynote speakers (Marian Burchardt, Rosalind Fredericks, Brian Larkin, Taibat Lawanson), providing either a lecture or an in-depth-discussion on the conference theme. The proposed conference is intended to further expand an international and interdisciplinary research network, comprised primarily of early career researchers working at the interface of religion and infrastructure. As part of the network's activities, publication of the conference presentations is planned.

Practicalities
All costs related to travel and stay in Legon, Accra, for accepted speakers will be covered by the Point Sud Program. Participants are expected to attend the entirety of the conference, arriving one day prior to the conference (e.g., Mon 5 June) and departing the day after the conference (e.g., Sun 11 June).
Early career researchers and African researchers are particularly encouraged to propose a paper. The workshop is committed to promoting equal opportunities for participation in terms

of gender, religion, and other socio-cultural differences. Paper proposals may be submitted in English or French.

COVID-19

All deadlines and dates are subject to revision as the situation regarding COVID-19 evolves. Our preference is to hold a face-to-face event in Legon. If the development of the pandemic does not allow for a workshop in presence, we will consider a virtual or hybrid conference and discuss this with the selected participants. Please note that the DFG does not cover the costs of COVID-19 tests. We hope you will apply despite these pandemic-related challenges. The safety and health of participants is our top priority.

Deadlines

Submission of proposals (500 words maximum) and a CV (2 pages maximum) in one single PDF-document: <u>November 30, 2022</u>, by email to **hoelzchen@cof.uni-tuebingen.de**

Notification of acceptance/rejection: January 31, 2022

> *Please note: We expect that participants will submit their full papers to their panel discussant prior to the conference in order to facilitate the discussant's role. The specific dates for this will be announced to accepted participants once the call is closed.