

African Association for the Study of Religions

10th Biennial Conference

Spirituality, Gender and Agency in African Contexts

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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS



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An asterisk () indicates the presenting author for co-authored papers.*

PLENARY ROUNDTABLES

Plenary Roundtable I: The Dialectics of Transformation — Elias Bongmba's Life of Scholarship

Chair: Nathanael Homewood, University of Minnesota

This panel explores the intellectual, institutional, and global impact of Elias Kifon Bongmba, whose career exemplifies a sustained engagement with transformation as both a scholarly method and a lived commitment. Bringing together perspectives from colleagues, former students, and collaborators, the roundtable highlights Bongmba's extensive publication record and his role in shaping key conversations in religious studies and African studies, including his contributions to the study of religion and conflict, reconciliation, and social justice. Equally central to this discussion is Bongmba's record of academic leadership, mentorship, and generosity of spirit. As the former President of the AASR, he has demonstrated a commitment to community-building within and beyond the academy, performing extravagant acts of mentorship and kindness. This roundtable will celebrate Bongmba's achievements within a broader dialectical framework, inviting each of us to reflect on how scholarship can serve as a catalyst for intellectual, social, and institutional transformation.

Discussants

- Adriaan van Klinken, University of Leeds
- Biko Mandela Gray, University of Houston
- Damaris Parsitau, Calvin University
- Ezra Chitando, University of Zimbabwe
- Jill Olivier, University of Cape Town (Delegated presentation)
- Abraham Waigi Ng'ang'a, Liverpool Hope University

Plenary Roundtable II: Special Panel Honouring Professor Gerrie ter Haar

Chair: Damaris Parsitau, Calvin University/Abel Ugba, University of Leeds

Organised by the AASR, this panel honours and celebrates Professor Gerrie ter Haar's monumental accomplishments in the academic study of African religions. This panel will bring together colleagues, collaborators, and emerging scholars to reflect on ter Haar's pioneering insights into African religious epistemologies, the political agency of religion, and the role of spirituality in public life. Through thematic papers, tributes, and a roundtable discussion, the panel will highlight the enduring impact of her work on both academic scholarship and socio-political practice.

Discussants

- Ezra Chitando, University of Zimbabwe
- Barbara Bompani, Università di Parma
- Adriaan van Klinken, University of Leeds
- James Leland Cox, University of Edinburgh
- Joram Tarusarira, University of Groningen
- Damaris Parsitau, Calvin University
- Afe Adogame, Princeton Theological Seminary
- Corey Williams, Leiden University

Meeting Room 03 Spiritual Ecologies and Worldmaking*Chair: Andrew Craig, Queen's University Belfast***1. Ke Lekunutung le Molimo: The ocean as a sacramental, liberatory space****Li'Tsoanelo Zwane** · *University of the Western Cape*

In this study, I seek to discuss the ocean as a sacramental, liberatory space and how the Basotho water rituals of tlhoekiso and kolobetso are not only examples of the embodied/lived theology nature of African Indigenous Spiritualities but also how these two rituals demonstrate sophisticated Indigenous eschatological philosophies, and justice through the reclamation of space and liberation through self-determination. I situate this work alongside other scholarly works which have sought to challenge the colonial ways in which Christian theologians continue to study African Indigenous Spiritualities, particularly how they misrepresent Indigenous ritualistic practices. Additionally, I question the legitimacy of inculturation as a beloved term amongst Christian theologians through arguing that, firstly, African Indigenous spiritual practices are legitimate practices that do not require Christian hermeneutical interpretations; and secondly, Christian theologians have never engaged in a deliberate and meaningful conversation with African Indigenous Spiritualities. I begin by problematising the study of African Indigenous Spiritualities by Christian theologians specifically. Next, I move to how inculturation, despite being construed as a process of dialogue between religions and spiritualities, is actually epistemic harm in that it does not engage African Indigenous Spiritualities as complete theologies. Instead, inculturation engages with African Indigenous Spiritualities as praeparatio evangelica; that is, spiritual practices purely meant to make Africans receptive to Christianity - positioned as 'the one true religion'. Using an autoethnographic approach, I then engage the Basotho water rituals of tlhoekiso and kolobetso as ocean-based rituals which demonstrate an Indigenous knowing of God and therefore a 'revelation theology', justice through the reclamation of space, liberation through self-determination and Indigenous eschatological philosophies.

2. Pidgin-Speaking Mothers, the Soil, and Worldmaking in the Local-Planetary Crisis in Anglophone Cameroon**Diana K. Lunkwitz* and Marceline Yele Lambiv** · *Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg / Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

The paper demonstrates the interplay and interconnection of local African beliefs and Christian traditions in the worldmaking of mothers working with the soil in the Anglophone part of Cameroon. This study examines how the relationship between Pidgin-speaking women in Southwestern Cameroon and the soil has changed during the three major crises of the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the Anglophone crisis, as well as the commercialization of the soil since colonial times. Additionally, an intergenerational research interest revealed that knowledge about the interrelationships within the ecosystem, such as the meaning of certain animal species, has been lost over generations—from the mother generation to the current generation. The interviewees—who have a special relationship with the soil and are predominantly illiterate—represent the first generation of farmers to utilize fertilizers and chemicals in their agricultural practices. As committed members of the Presbyterian community, elements from both Christian traditions as well as oral histories, traditions, and beliefs are entangled in the females' worldmaking. The individual and communal worldmaking of women related to various concepts of the soil offers them the opportunity to make sense of and cope with the ongoing Anglophone crisis. Mothers' life worlds are thereby renegotiated amid transformative changes, demonstrating coping strategies for them and community members around them. On the one hand, the study provides new insights into the complexities of crises and local-global entanglements in worldmaking and persisting inequalities, including experiences of violence, displacement, climate change, and social and economic changes. In contrast, the agency of mothers, (widowed) women, daughters, and committed members of the community—who are particularly connected to the soil and play a crucial role in providing for their communities—is highlighted for the first time, along with their relevance in local and planetary challenges.

3. My Food is African: The Role of African Indigenous Women's Urban Backyard Gardens in Food Sovereignty in Lusaka, Zambia in Contemporary Times

Nelly Mwale · University of Zambia

Despite calls for food sovereignty which grants indigenous people the right to define and control their own food based on the creation of a food system anchored on local communities, indigenous foods continue to remain vulnerable to loss due to climate change and global food systems in urban spaces. Additionally, discourses of food sovereignty are often detached from spirituality, yet spirituality in the African Indigenous Religious worldview is a lived experience permeating all spheres of life, and women hold sacred roles. As such, the intersecting role of indigenous women and spirituality in fostering food sovereignty at the household level remains overshadowed, thereby neglecting their contributions to food sovereignty through urban gardening practices. Therefore, using the work of Zambian indigenous women in urban gardening in Lusaka, this paper explores how women employ their agency to uphold their spiritual connection to land and food through their creation of backyard gardens. Grounded in African ecofeminism, and drawing on a narrative research design which utilises interviews and document review, the aim of the paper is to reconstruct how women in urban spaces utilise the backyard gardens as sites of spirituality and food sovereignty in Zambia. By showing how Indigenous women have created backyard gardens to reclaim their spiritual roles as nurturers and keepers of the domestic home shrine, the paper contends that backyard gardens not only serve as sites of spiritual connections, but also sites for resistance as women demonstrate their urgency to grow and preserve indigenous foods that are also medicinal. By so doing, the paper contributes to rethinking the ways in which gender, spirituality and urgency connect as women utilise their urgency to preserve indigenous food for nutritional, spiritual and ecological benefits, and resist the globalised food systems which threaten food sovereignty in urban city life in contemporary times.

4. Spiritual Water and Gendered Practices: Religion, Power, and Household Water Management in Botswana

Siamisang Duanga Saudu · University of Botswana

This paper explores how Christianity and African Traditional Religion may shape household water management and gendered power relations in Botswana, drawing on feminist political ecology, lived religion, and gender–power theory. Using desk-based research, it synthesises existing studies, policy reports, and ethnographic accounts to examine how religious norms related to purity, care, and duty intersect with the allocation of water-related labour and household decision-making. The analysis identifies patterns in women's lived experiences as documented in the literature, illustrating how spirituality can offer interpretive frameworks through which they navigate, negotiate, or contest domestic expectations. By framing religion as a site of social influence, the study highlights the intricate interplay of faith, gender, and domestic governance. These insights provide a basis for considering cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions in gender-responsive, context-sensitive approaches to household water management, inviting reflection on how religion and gender shape everyday domestic life.

Classroom 16 Healers, Witchcraft and Contested Authority

Chair: Amy Allocco, Elon University

1. "Accused but Not Silenced": Gender, Professional Authority, and Witchcraft Accusations in Traditional Healing: Comparative Perspectives from South Africa and Zimbabwe

Juliet Chipso Sigauke · University of the Free State

In many communities, gender and professional authority have a way of shaping witchcraft accusations within traditional healing systems in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. Since pre-colonial times, traditional healers have occupied influential religious, social, and medical roles, yet they also operate within environments where accusations of witchcraft are common. Traditional healers, especially women, often face witchcraft accusations that expose them to social stigma and danger. These accusations are not only a question of belief or merely spiritual claims; instead, they also function as mechanisms for regulating professional legitimacy, reinforcing gender norms, and negotiating moral authority. This paper highlights the voices of these traditional healers, showing how they navigate accusations, maintain their practices, and assert authority. Drawing on empirical data from semi-structured interviews and

document analysis, it illustrates how traditional healers are not passive victims, as they actively negotiate, resist, and assert their spiritual authority while navigating social pressures. By focusing on the experiences of these healers in South Africa and Zimbabwe, the research challenges stereotypes and offers insight into how marginalized individuals live, contest, and find meaning within spiritual and social constraints. In their responses, these traditional healers also present how the Witchcraft Suppression Acts play when it comes to witchcraft accusations and persecution. Their argument challenges the idea that accused individuals are powerless and sheds light on how spirituality can be a source of strength and agency. The paper also offers a new understanding of the connection between gender, spirituality and authority in spiritual communities and within traditional healing systems.

2. Gendered Power? Male and Female Healers in MaDzimbabwe Cosmologies

Samuel Chikowero · *University of the Free State*

Throughout history, women have demonstrated agency by occupying key spiritual and cultural positions within their societies. Scholars such as Enid Gort (1997) and Palesa Nqambaza (2024) have claimed that the institution of healing is one avenue through which women have exercised agency to achieve upward social mobility and dominance over men. Building on these studies, this paper recalibrates this conversation by moving beyond the claims that the institution of traditional healing is a tool of empowerment for oppressed women to challenge patriarchy. This is a simplistic and binary way to frame spirituality and access to power, which does not fully capture the true story of masvikiro (spirit mediums) in African societies. I argue that although women's involvement in this institution among MaDzimbabwe affords them some level of autonomy and respect, the practice is not merely an act of challenging and unsettling patriarchy. Instead, women's participation in the institution of healing as masvikiro is not a matter of choice. The evidence shows that the spirit chooses their preferred medium, whether male or female and guide them throughout the initiation process. The process of initiation into spirit mediumship makes the analyses by Gort and Nqambaza — that there are more women than men in this institution as the former seek to level up gender and power imbalances — unconvincing. This scenario, as this paper shows, has implications on how such women relate to society and their position as healers, mothers, and wives. Drawing on a wide range of oral materials from selected male and female healers across Zimbabwe, this paper asks such questions as: what does it take for one to become a svikiro? What are the family and societal perceptions about both female and male healers and wielders of power? What are the gendered implications when female spirits possess male mediums and vice versa, and also multiple spirits across genders possess a man? How does this frame the space and practice of healing?

3. Accused From Healers to 'Witch Doctors': Colonial Misrepresentations of Sangomas in African Traditional Religion

Afikile Candlovu · *University of the Free State*

Sangomas, as traditional healers within African Traditional Religion (ATR), occupy an important spiritual, social, and therapeutic role in many African communities. However, they are frequently misunderstood and misrepresented as "witch doctors," a label that carries negative, fearful, and derogatory connotations. This misrepresentation is largely rooted in colonial and missionary encounters with African spirituality, where indigenous religious practices were interpreted through Western Christian frameworks that equated African cosmology with superstition, witchcraft, and evil. As a result, the complex theological, ethical, and communal foundations of sangoma practice have been obscured. This paper critically examines the origins and persistence of the "witch doctor" stereotype and argues that it reflects a failure to distinguish between healing, divination, and witchcraft within African Traditional Religion itself. Drawing on African religious scholarship, the paper highlights the role of sangomas as spiritual mediators between the living and the ancestors, custodians of indigenous knowledge, and agents of communal healing rather than harm. It further explores how the continued misuse of the term "witch doctor" contributes to cultural marginalisation, epistemic injustice, and the delegitimisation of African spiritual knowledge systems. By adopting a decolonial approach, this study seeks to reframe the understanding of sangomas within their proper religious and cultural context. It calls for more nuanced academic, theological, and public engagement with African Traditional Religion that respects its internal categories and moral frameworks. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on decolonisation, religious pluralism, and the reclaiming of African spiritual identities.

4. When doing gender call for AIC's response: Hegemonic masculinities, Amazioni churches in Soweto-South Africa and the changing masculinities

Karabo Rikhotso* and Clementine Nishimwe · University of Johannesburg

This is a qualitative research conducted at two AmaZioni churches in Soweto. Data suggests that cultural ideologies that often socializes and create expectations on men, such as suppression of emotions, having multiple sexual partners, a must-have employment, fathers' absenteeism almost normalize the parallel between being male and being violent. In fact, when many women and men see a man while walking in the dark in the middle of the city of Johannesburg, they fear that they may be raped or exposed to violence. As research has indicated in the context of America, maleness and racialization of the violence attached to it has become frequent in many societies. In the context of the famous township of Soweto, a legacy of apartheid, black men are also often feared and likened with violence because of their cultural socialization. As it has been written, the African Independent Churches (AICs) has and are still playing a significant role in responding to the legacies of colonization. One of the legacies of colonization the men of Soweto have to deal with on everyday basis is the high level of poverty and unemployment, the main ingredient to the increasing cases of gender-based violence. Based on the findings of the study we argue that while the large society of Soweto, South Africa expects men to do their gender and perform their maleness according to their socialization – such doing of gender has been sustaining hegemonic masculinities. Furthermore, the Soweto men who join AIC churches, such as AmaZioni, feel that being a member of the church changes their financial life. We read that as an opportunity for the AICs to enable them to interrogate the world in which they have been socialized and its African fabric.

Classroom 17 Women's Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development in African Christianity: Beyond Marginalization Narratives

Chair: Satoko Fujiwara, University of Tokyo

Panel abstract

This panel reframes scholarly discourse on African Christian women's spiritual Formation and leadership by centering generative agency rather than deficit narratives. While women constitute the numerical majority in African churches and sustain congregational vitality through pastoral care, financial stewardship, and intergenerational faith transmission, dominant scholarship has oscillated between rendering them invisible or framing their experiences primarily through marginalization. This panel foregrounds how African women craft distinctive spiritual epistemologies, exercise theological leadership, and constitute communities of formation that reshape ecclesial landscapes across the continent and diaspora.

Our multidisciplinary approach examines spiritual formation as both personal cultivation and collective practice, revealing how women navigate and transform gendered religious structures while maintaining theological integrity. We attend particularly to voices typically excluded from both ecclesial power and scholarly attention: women and children with disabilities, single mothers, and those operating outside conventional denominational frameworks. Rather than treating these as separate "marginalized groups," we explore how intersecting identities produce unique spiritual innovations and leadership modalities.

The panel's geographical scope spans Southern, Eastern, and West Africa, with diasporic connections, demonstrating both regional specificities and trans-continental patterns. Methodologically, we privilege ethnographic attentiveness, narrative analysis, and collaborative knowledge production that positions African women as theological interlocutors rather than research subjects. Our papers examine: theological education and women's epistemological authority; spiritual formation among mothers navigating disability and social stigma; prophetic leadership and economic agency in charismatic movements; single motherhood as a site of spiritual resilience and community-building; and how young women theologians are decolonizing spiritual formation frameworks. This panel contributes to conference themes by demonstrating that gender and agency in African religions cannot be adequately theorized without sustained engagement with women's spiritual leadership as creative, transformative, and generative. We move beyond documentation of exclusion to analysis of how African Christian women are actively shaping contemporary religious landscapes, theological discourse, and practices of spiritual formation that extend far beyond institutional boundaries.

1. Pulpit, Purse, and Power or Altars of Influence? Money, Religious Authority, and the Contested Agency of Pentecostal Women at Kenya's Political Altar

Damaris Parsitau · Calvin University

In Kenya's Pentecostal public sphere, the pulpit has emerged as an unexpected corridor to political power. This paper examines how Pentecostal women have mobilized religious authority and financial capital to access, negotiate, and at times contest the centers of political power in Kenya, raising urgent questions about the nature of agency in contexts where faith, money, and patriarchal political structures intersect. Drawing on the case of Teresia Wairimu, founder of Faith Evangelistic Ministry (FEM) and one of Kenya's most prominent female televangelist-preachers, this paper interrogates how women have leveraged prosperity gospel theology, media visibility, and philanthropic networks to position themselves as indispensable brokers between the spiritual and political realms. Wairimu's ministry offers a compelling lens through which to examine this phenomenon. Her cultivation of high-profile political relationships including her widely publicized presiding over the swearing in ceremony of Kenya's self-proclaimed Born-again President, William Ruto, Yearly prophecies and prayer interventions during electoral moments and her proximity to successive Kenyan administrations reveals a carefully negotiated form of influence that operates simultaneously through spiritual legitimacy and material exchange. Yet this influence is neither straightforward nor uncontested. This paper argues that Wairimu's political engagements illuminate what I term "altar politics," a mode of gendered religious brokerage in which women gain proximity to power not by challenging its patriarchal structures, but by consecrating them. The altar, in this reading, becomes both a site of women's visibility and a mechanism of their containment. The paper is based on ethnographic research and social-political analysis to understand how Pentecostal women negotiate money, power and influence. Theoretically, the paper draws on Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando's work on gender and African Christianity, Ruth Marshall's analysis of Pentecostalism and political society in Africa, and feminist theorizations of agency beyond the liberal autonomy model particularly Saba Mahmood's reformulation of agency as the capacity to act within, rather than against, structures of power. The paper argues that the political influence of Pentecostal women is best understood not as emancipation nor as subordination, but as a contested, contingent, and structurally mediated agency, one that simultaneously opens and forecloses possibilities for women's power in Kenya's religious-political landscape.

2. Reflections on African Women: A lived Spirituality

Marilyn Naidoo · University of South Africa

African women in academia occupy a unique and often precarious position. While their scholarly contributions may even expand theological discourse and challenge patriarchal structures, many encounter tension between professional expectations and the sustaining practices of faith. The academy often privileges rational detachment, creating environments where expressions of personal spirituality may be marginalized or perceived as incompatible with scholarly credibility. Some frequently wrestle with imposter syndrome, questioning their legitimacy in spaces historically dominated by male voices and secular norms. The need to remain spiritually connected while navigating institutional pressures that prioritize productivity, competition, and secularized modes of inquiry is a real struggle. Sustaining faith in such contexts requires resilience, intentional practices of devotion, and supportive networks that affirm both intellectual and spiritual identities.

3. Exploring Women's Spiritual Formation and Leadership in Male-Founded Pentecostal Churches: An Ethnographic Study from Nigeria

Itohan M. Idumwonyi · Gonzaga University

This study explores the sociological dimensions of women's spiritual development and leadership in male-founded Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. It seeks to understand how women navigate their roles and influence church activities within a context dominated by patriarchal values. Utilizing qualitative methods, the research examines the interplay between faith engagement and leadership assertion, highlighting the challenges women face, such as restrictive theological interpretations and societal expectations. Additionally, the study underscores the significant contributions women make to community cohesion and spiritual growth, emphasizing their resilience and adaptability in claiming leadership roles. By amplifying women's voices, the research offers insights into their pivotal role in shaping the future of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The findings advocate for the reevaluation of traditional gender roles within the church,

promoting greater inclusion of women in leadership positions. Ultimately, this study aims to illuminate the importance of women's spiritual formation, encouraging more equitable practices in religious leadership.

4. Women, Intersectionality and Political Power in Charismatic Christian Movements in Kenya: (A Case of Rev. Teresia Wairimu of Faith Evangelistic Ministry and Margaret Wanjiru of The Glory is Here Ministry).

Mary Kihuha · Pan-African Christian University

The article looks into the intersection between women, political power, and charismatic leadership in Kenya with specific reference to Wairimu Nelson of Faith Evangelistic Ministry and Margaret Wanjiru of The Glory is Here Ministry. The two women are founding leaders of mega-churches in Nairobi City. They have managed to command certain political power on account of gaining trust and association with different successive political regimes in Kenya besides not fitting within the 'respectable woman' attributes of Kenyan popular society. As divorced and strongly willful women leaders of independent urban congregations in Nairobi, their association with political power has born sweet and bitter moments for their ministries. Their association with power and benefits thereof draws mixed reactions among mainline religious circles, which have in the past dominated political power and following. Utilizing an intersectional hermeneutic; the article draws parallel patterns in Charismatic Leadership and Women's ability to sway political power in Kenya, with continuities and discontinuities, in African Independent Churches (AICs) since the struggle for independence and argues that a far-right political shift in Kenya is underway powered by women and the charismatic movement. The agency of women especially those in the margins within a patriarchal imagination framework in the religious and political space underscores intersecting dynamics that have allowed women to be at the forefront of the Religio-Political Space.

Classroom 18 Marriage, Intimacy and Spiritual Power

Chair: Bidi Broderick, Independent Scholar

1. Female--Female Marriage, Spiritual Power, and the Politics of Intimacy: Reimagining Gender Agency in Igbo Indigenous Traditions

Charles Chukwudi Ugwunnadi · Makerere University / University of Nigeria

This paper examines how spiritual ontologies, indigenous gender practices, and political power converge in the Igbo cultural sphere, using the institution of Igbo female--female marriage as a lens. While Igbo female--female marriage is often marginalized or misrepresented in Western-normative frameworks of sexuality, this study interprets it as an expression of relational agency embedded within indigenous cosmologies. I argue that rather than being a deviation from normative patriarchy, Igbo female--female marriage can function as a strategic spiritual and social mechanism of kinship, economic agency and gendered solidarity. Drawing on ethnographic, philosophical and ethical perspectives, the analysis places this phenomenon in dialogue with the regulation of intimacy by the postcolonial Nigerian state, showing how spiritual practice and gendered relationality can challenge the state's moral and juridical monopoly over intimate life. The paper further explores how women's spiritual formation—through ritual, kinship and informal networks—enables distinctive forms of agency under conditions of socio-political constraint. It thus contributes to debates on spirituality, gender and agency in Africa by showing how spirituality is not just a facet of belief or institution, but a lived orientation that intersects with power, resistance and identity. The findings call for a decolonial rethinking of gender categories, state regulation of intimacy, and the ethical frameworks underpinning human rights in African contexts.

2. Till Death Do Us Apart: Women's Negotiation of Spiritual Agency Through Marriage in KwaShembe

Kuhle Nwabisa Zondeka · University of Cape Town / University of the Western

This paper examines how women within the Shembe religion (Nazareth Baptist Church) negotiate spiritual agency through the institution of marriage. In KwaShembe, marriage is framed not only as a social contract but as a sacred covenant that embodies divine order, communal responsibility, and moral duty. Within this context, women's roles are shaped by patriarchal interpretations of faith, emphasising obedience, ritual purity, and service. Yet, marriage is also a site of subtle negotiation, where women exercise agency through participation in rituals, prayer, and everyday devotional practices. Drawing on African feminist and decolonial frameworks, this study highlights how women creatively navigate the tension between prescribed gender roles and personal spiritual authority, reinterpreting

religious teachings to assert dignity, moral influence, and embodied faith. By centring women's lived experiences, the paper foregrounds the ways in which spirituality is both constraining and enabling—where marital life becomes a medium through which women cultivate power, resilience, and relational negotiation. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader conversations on spirituality, gender, and agency in African religions, demonstrating that the sacred and the social are deeply intertwined in shaping women's lives and possibilities within indigenous religious movements.

3. When the Ancestors Speak: Ndishi, Christian Morality, and the Resilience of Indigenous Justice in Igboland

Chigozie Nwaka · *Covenant Theological Academy*

This paper explores the complex encounter between Christianity, indigenous knowledge systems, and modernity through the moral framework of Ndishi — a traditional Igbo institution of justice and ethical surveillance. The study draws from a 2025 incident in Atta-Nwambiri, a historic town in southeastern Nigeria, comprising three closely linked communities — Atta, Egwedu, and Umunam-Atta. Within this cultural landscape, Ndishi continues to function as a moral-ethical institution that regulates fidelity, truth-telling, and communal harmony through ancestral sanction and ritual enforcement. In the event under study, a woman confessed to adultery after experiencing Ndishi-induced affliction, revealing an ongoing affair with her pastor — who initially denied the charge, dismissing Ndishi as powerless under Christianity. However, the invocation of the Oke-Ofo (ancestral symbol of justice) by the traditional ruler led to the pastor's eventual confession, reaffirming the enduring potency of Ndishi and the communal validation of its authority. Engaging African Cultural Hermeneutics and decolonial approaches to religious knowledge, this paper argues that Ndishi embodies an enduring moral epistemology that negotiates with, rather than disappears before, Christian and modern frameworks. While Christianity foregrounds divine grace and personal repentance, Ndishi emphasizes communal justice and moral restitution. Yet both converge on the condemnation of infidelity, suggesting a shared moral ontology that transcends religious boundaries. Ultimately, the study highlights Ndishi as a resilient site of moral negotiation and religious agency — a system where ancestral justice, Christian ethics, and modern moral consciousness continue to interpenetrate. In addition, it demonstrates how African indigenous systems adapt, resist, and reassert themselves within plural modern contexts.

4. Spirituality, Gender and Agency in African Religions

Tumisang Shirley Mthembo · *University of Botswana*

African religion may be understood as an inherent and pervasive dimension of social existence rather than a belief system acquired solely through formal instruction. It is embedded in kinship structures, communal rituals, moral codes, and cosmological understandings that shape individuals from birth. Through processes of socialization, language, and everyday practice, spiritual consciousness is transmitted intergenerationally, rendering it an integral aspect of identity formation. In this sense, African spirituality is not merely learned but is experienced as an inborn orientation, as individuals are born into communities where the sacred and the social are deeply intertwined. Scholars argue that religion attains its fullest significance when it is adopted through conscious deliberation rather than inherited through unexamined tradition. As individuals mature, they acquire the reflexive capacity to question, interpret, and negotiate belief systems within the wider structures of society and culture. When religious identity is transmitted primarily by birth, it risks operating as a form of social conditioning that reinforces continuity without ensuring internal assent. By contrast, a religion chosen after the development of critical consciousness represents an act of agency, transforming belief from a social inheritance into a personally grounded conviction shaped by reason, experience, and self-awareness.

Meeting Room 03 **Spirituality, Gender Identity and Sexuality**

Chair: Abirat Zakariah, University of Ghana

1. African Spirituality and Gender Identity: An Exploration of Shona Sayings and Proverbs

Phillip Musoni · Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University

In communities throughout Zimbabwe and other Southern African regions, African spirituality often informs the understanding and interpretation of gender identities and expressions within society. It is customary in African cultures for families to hand down sayings and proverbs suggesting certain activities are inappropriate for girls, while boys are encouraged to partake in them, and vice versa. These sayings and proverbs are thought to set norms, both consciously and unconsciously, that elevate men above women. For instance, some proverbs like "Musha mukadzi" — which means "a home is incomplete without a woman" — relegate women to domestic roles while men are permitted to venture out and are not bound to a rural homestead. This study contends that these sayings and proverbs contribute to the dehumanization of women, sampling common ones that justify masculinities over femininities. This article employs ethnography, also known as cultural anthropology, within the qualitative research methodology to explore the common sayings and proverbs that limit the participation of women and girls in activities and responsibilities traditionally assigned to men and boys, particularly among the Karanga people of Chivi in Zimbabwe's Masvingo province. The findings indicate that these sayings and proverbs are deeply ingrained in the consciousness of both genders, perpetuating a spirituality that defines gender roles and identities. Furthermore, the study suggests that these expressions impede the advancement of women's emancipation by glorifying masculinity, leading young girls to view their gender as a burden rather than a blessing.

2. 'Single in this world but spiritually engaged': Chivanhu and myths on female singleness

Tendai Mangena · University of Leeds

In Shona, while women known as mbonga were considered single conventionally, they were spiritually engaged, as they were also known as 'wives of Mwari (God)' or 'women pledged to the spirits'. The 'spiritual' marriages between them and Mwari or spirits meant they could not be conventionally married. The belief that mbonga had spiritual husbands and could not, therefore, enter conventional marriages reflects a significant issue in Shona and most African worldviews, that the spiritual and physical realms deeply intersect. In this paper I explore this belief that 'spiritually engaged' women cannot be married or may have failed marriages. I specifically examine stories told by Shona women and the reasons provided as general causes of female singleness in an ethnographic study aimed at understanding the lives and experiences of Shona single women. Although many possible reasons for singleness were highlighted during the study, I focus here on those related to Chivanhu. Chivanhu in this case is understood as those ideas central to the Shona worldview, 'including religion, belief in Mwari, ancestors and the living dead, spirits and forces, magic and the practice of medicine, witchcraft, sorcery, and divination among others'. Most narratives by single women present a recognisable mythical trope, as they recount the beginnings of singleness—particularly within a family—and the events that triggered patterns of singleness in certain families.

3. African Spiritualities and Religions on Gender and Sexuality Discourses Before and After the Advent of Christianity and Colonisation in Africa

Themba Shingange · University of South Africa (UNISA)

African spiritualities and religions had their unique approaches to gender and sexuality discourses before the advent of Christianity on the continent. However, the dawn of Christianity in Africa was interlinked with the colonial and imperial projects which were aimed not only at the Christianisation agenda but were also agencies of conversion, civilisation, colonisation and imperialism. Succinctly put, African cultures, traditions, customs, religions, spiritualities, gender and sexuality discourses were to be converted and remodelled in the likeness of the West. Thus, although there were greater developments brought by Christianity to the continent, there was, however, also great damage caused to the African spiritualities and epistemologies. This paper used a desktop research approach to explore the nuances of African spiritualities and religions in the gender and sexuality discourses during the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial epochs. It further looks at how Christianisation and the colonial era brought a paradigm shift that is a fulcrum

of the contemporary constructions of genders and sexualities in Africa. The preliminary findings show that Christianisation and the colonial era had a great influence on the gender and sexuality discourses in Africa; furthermore, the contemporary African discourses on the subject are still centred on the Western hegemonic and superiority complex embedded in the Western epistemic privileges. Thus, the paper explored some possible ways to contribute to the call for Africans to look back at their history so that they can be able to find ways to transform the current status quo.

4. Politics of Being and Vocation: Traditional healers' sexual identities in African Spirituality

Joel Mokhoathi and Lindiwe Khuzwayo · University of South Africa (UNISA)

Inspired by the work of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, "Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My life as a lesbian Sangoma", the study interrogates the politics of being, and what it means to be a homosexual Sangoma in the context of gendered identities and sociocultural expectations. It is a qualitative research study that is informed by Participatory Action Research. The indispensable data was collected through two separate openended focused group discussions with 14 participants (with 7 participants per group). The participants were recruited through a snowballing technique, and the focused group discussions were framed around a specific topic: "Challenging homo/trans/ interphobias in our society: gender-diverse, and gender non-conforming sexual Identities". The objective of the study was to create a safe space for dialogue on gender issues, sexual violence, and discrimination against queer and gender-diverse people in Durban Central and Pietermaritzburg Central in KwaZulu Natal. The findings of the study revealed that the practice of homosexuality is not only limited to inclination, as a preference or personal choice to practicing homosexuality; and not solely to a biological make-up, which influences homosexuality through hormonal imbalances in the body; but can also be influenced by androgyny – the possession of both masculine and feminine characteristics, more especially for people with vocation, who are called to serve as traditional healers or spiritual guides.

Classroom 16 Boundaries in Flux — Rethinking Religion and Politics from Africa

Chair: Barbara Bompani, Università di Parma & Benjamin Kirby, University of Bayreuth

Panel abstract

The relationship between religion and politics in Africa has long attracted scholarly attention, producing a rich body of interdisciplinary work. Four dominant approaches stand out:

1. Analyses of political institutions and formal structures framed by democratization, modernization, and secularization. 2. Accounts that portray African worldviews as inherently spiritual, with religion permeating every domain—including the political. 3. Studies of subject formation, where religious discourse functions as a technology of political self-fashioning and governance. 4. Accounts of religion as a response to political-economic transformations—whether as a mode of resistance, adaptation, or identity-making.

Each of these approaches has generated valuable insights, yet they also risk reproducing Eurocentric assumptions—whether by privileging modernist categories, narrowing politics to institutions or interiorized selves, reducing religion to a political instrument, or essentializing African life-worlds.

This panel invites papers that rethink these debates through an alternative lens. We approach religion and politics not as discrete spheres but as relational fields constituted through practice. Rather than asking how religion influences politics (or vice versa), we highlight the processes through which their distinction is drawn, blurred, or undone in specific contexts—and why these boundaries are foregrounded in some instances but vanish in others. This perspective brings into view forms of religious-political reordering that existing frameworks obscure. We welcome empirically grounded contributions that explore these dynamics in contexts of transformation, contestation, and the search for new political and moral orders.

Key questions for discussion include:

- How and on whose terms are religion and politics (un)differentiated?
- When and why do such distinctions become visible—and when do they disappear?
- What practices blur or erase the separation between religion and politics?
- How do these shifting distinctions and entanglements reshape communities, publics, and institutions?

- What conceptual insights from African contexts can advance broader theorizing of how religion and politics are made, unmade, and reordered?

1. African Christian Nationalism: A Typology?

Siphiwe Ignatius Dube · University of Witwatersrand

A clear global narrative around Christian Nationalism can be drawn from the work of a multiplicity of scholars writing particularly from the American and Western European contexts. However, given the Euro-American focus of much of the scholarship on Christian Nationalism, part of what my entry into the debate aims to do is to contribute to the expanding literature on this scholarship by demonstrating the far-reaching global impact of Christian Nationalism. This presentation builds on a previously published work on Christian Nationalism in Post-apartheid South Africa, wherein I shed light on the extremely important processes of the rise of Christian Nationalism and Christian New Right ideology in post-apartheid South Africa, including the centrality of Neo/Pentecostalism in foregrounding a new form of Christian Nationalism in South Africa. A key aspect of this presentation is an attempt at dealing with differences within Christian Nationalism and between Christian Nationalisms. In so doing, I seek to ask whether there is something distinct about Christian Nationalism in Sub-Saharan Africa and, if so, what are its contours in relation to the Euro-American versions? In other words, I explore how Christian Nationalism is being taken up in Sub-Saharan Africa and in what ways it is comparable or different from the American form – hence the gesture towards the notion of a typology. I draw on the work of scholars such as Adriaan van Klinken, Naomi Haynes, and Jeffrey Haynes, amongst others.

2. The Moral Making of the World: A Relational Approach to Religion and Politics in/from Africa

Eva Spies · University of Bayreuth

The paper explores efforts of moral world-making in which differences and similarities between religion and politics emerge through relational processes rather than existing as preconceived categories. Today, many African Pentecostal leaders are actively creating social designs and pursuing transformative practices, thereby often ignoring or reconfiguring the common distinction between politics and religion observed in many nation states. Pentecostal educational projects, such as private schools and universities, demonstrate how society and a Christian world are to be 'engineered' from their perspective, which transformative aspirations are at stake, and who is ascribed transformative agency. In this context, education is often advertised as a way to "liberation" from disappointed expectations and evil spirits, and is understood as a tool for the moral remaking of the world. By examining Pentecostal educational initiatives and their future-oriented ambitions especially in Ghana and Nigeria, the paper aims to show that the practices involved cannot be easily understood as the translation of 'universal' global categories of religion and politics, nor as the implementation of a particularistic 'enchanted' ontology where the two converge. Instead, the initiatives involve an ongoing reordering of relations, implying struggles over power and moral issues, and constantly generating multiple configurations of religion and politics.

3. Religion and Spirituality in African Political Spaces

Felix Kumah-Abiwu · Kent State University

The study of religion and spirituality continues to not only occupy a central place in the scholarly discourse on African cultural values and thought systems, but these areas of inquiry have also emerged as important elements in African political spaces. In other words, the question of how African political spaces is being shaped by religion and spirituality has become an important area for scholarly interest. Major religions such as Christianity, Islam, African traditional religion are cases in point. While religion and spirituality share commonalities on the meaning, connection and purpose of life, they also differ in many ways. Religion is often structured with shared beliefs, rituals and traditions with a strong connection to a higher authority or the Supreme Being. On the other hand, spirituality is more connected to how a person finds meaning or purpose in life through inward search and connection to nature. Scholars have underscored how religions like Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion have continued to engage with African political systems. Among these religions, Christianity appears to play a leading role in African political spaces. What has become known as political or election prophecies by prominent Christian leaders, especially from Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are shaping African political spaces. To better understand the complex inter-connection between Christianity and African politics, the paper draws on conceptual ideas on political prophecies and "soft theocracy" for the analyses. The paper is expected to enhance our knowledge and understanding of how Christianity is shaping African political spaces and governance practices in recent years

4. Religious Voices in Nigeria's Politics: Pentecostal Leaders' Public Discourse during the Buhari Era

Faithful Oluokun · University of Bayreuth

This paper examines the political views of two Nigerian Pentecostal Church leaders, namely Bishop David Oyedepo (Winners' Chapel) and Pastor (Dr) Paul Eneche (Dunamis International Gospel Centre), shared on social media during the presidency of Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023). Drawing on analysis of selected sermons, commentaries and prophetic declarations, this paper treats their utterances not only as religious teachings but also as a mode of sharing political ideology through sacred platforms. The analysis centres on the central question of how religious leaders articulate political thought through prophecies and sermons. This paper argues that sermons and prophecies can also be a field of discourse where the boundary between religion and politics is actively negotiated and performed. In this paper, prophecy is seen as a religious vehicle for political reasoning, one that influences the public, assigns moral accountability, and frames governance in eschatological terms.

The paper focuses on political opinion in sermons between 2015-2023 with: (1) Commentaries on politics and Governance ; (2) prophetic pronouncements that involve government, politics, or the State of the Nation; and (3) calls to civic and spiritual action that mobilise congregants as political subjects. These reveal how the pulpit and the social media feed combine to constitute a channel for religious-political reordering in contemporary Nigeria. By attending to the forms through which religious leaders express political thought, the paper contributes to broader theorising about how religion and politics are made and unmade in African contexts, and what African Pentecostalism, in particular, offers as a conceptual resource for rethinking that relationship.

Classroom 17 Islam, Mysticism and Knowledge

Chair: Siwakhile Ngcobo, University of Pretoria

1. Africa, Islam, and Spirituality: Expressions of Islamic Mysticism in South Africa

Shoayb Ahmed · University of South Africa

This paper explores the intersection of Africa, Islam, and spirituality with a specific focus on South Africa, examining how Islamic spiritual practices have evolved, persisted, and adapted within the socio-cultural and political landscapes of the country. The research situates South Africa within broader African Islamic traditions, tracing historical trajectories from the early arrival of Islam via enslaved people from Southeast Asia and East Africa to the development of contemporary spiritual expressions among diverse Muslim communities, including Cape Malays, Indian South Africans, and African converts. Central to the study is the role of Sufism and other mystical traditions, which serve as key spiritual frameworks in negotiating identity, resistance, and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa. The study employs a multidisciplinary qualitative methodology combining historical analysis and ethnographical studies. Archival research draws on colonial records, missionary documents, and Islamic manuscripts to reconstruct the historical spread and transformation of Islam in South Africa. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg, focusing on mosques, Sufi lodges (zawiyas), and Islamic spiritual retreats (khanqahs). Participant observation and interviews with religious leaders, scholars, and lay practitioners provide insight into contemporary spiritual practices, intergenerational transmission of Islamic knowledge, and the tensions between orthodoxy and vernacular spirituality. Findings reveal that South African Islamic spirituality is deeply rooted in African socio-cultural contexts, often blending local customs with Islamic teachings. Sufi orders such as the Qadiriyya, Chishtiyya, Ba Alawi, and Tijaniyya play a central role in community cohesion and spiritual expression among African Muslims. Spiritual practices serve as a means of resistance and healing, particularly in marginalized communities. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on African Islam by highlighting the dynamic interplay between faith, culture, and identity in South Africa's complex religious landscape, and underscores the importance of spirituality as a lived and evolving phenomenon.

2. Recognition of Learning from Islamic Education in Higher Education in South Africa

Zahraa McDonald · University of Johannesburg

Continently, part of the vision of the African Continental Qualification Framework (ACQF), adopted by the African Union in 2022, is 'to facilitate the recognition of diplomas and certificates' (Hazel et al.,2022,10). A qualifications framework is intended to improve the understanding of qualifications regarding the information they convey to an employer about prospective workers' competencies (Evans-Klock, 2010,iii). Recognition of learning occurs when

recognised authorities recognise qualifications, credits, or prior learning aligned to accepted norms and standards (Chiyaba et al., 2022). At the same time, the ACQF guideline for recognising learning is not explicit about how learning acquired through Islamic Education (IE) would be recognised. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) allows learners who have not had formal education but have gained significant experience in a specific field to receive or upgrade a qualification (Chiyaba, et al.,2022).Chiyaba et al. (2022, 16) name 'learning obtained through organised training not leading to an award'non-formal learning. They further list faith-based institutions as one example where non-formal learning might occur (Chiyaba, et al. 2022, 8). As such many non-formal learning can be acquired at Islamic education institutions in South Africa (McDonald, 2013). In South Africa, no qualification provided by Islamic Education institutions is known to be accredited and registered on a qualification framework. This research aims to contribute to developing procedures for explicitly integrating IE into higher education policy in South Africa. The paper will be centred around asking how and in what ways learning from Islamic education institutions is recognised by higher education institutions in South Africa. The paper is a desktop review of RPL frameworks and guidelines in South Africa in order to consider how and to what extent learning from IE might be recognised. The findings have implications for how spirituality could be accommodated within mainstream higher education.

3. Islam and Gender Equity in Nigeria: Exploring Zakāh and Inheritance Frameworks for Economic Justice

Mohammed Mustapha Kannike Uthman · *University of Abuja*

In contemporary Nigeria, discussions on spirituality, gender and socio-economic agency continue to shape scholarly and public discourse across religious communities. Within Nigerian Islam, wealth distribution mechanisms such as Zakāh and inheritance function as foundational instruments through which spiritual ethics are translated into tangible social justice outcomes. These mechanisms embody the Islamic moral vision of equity, compassion and communal responsibility in economic relations. This paper explores how these frameworks contribute to gender equity by examining their scriptural bases, classical and contemporary juristic interpretations and practical implications in Nigerian Muslim societies. It highlights the role of Zakāh as a divinely mandated welfare institution that supports vulnerable groups, including women, through structured redistribution aimed at reducing poverty and enhancing social protection. The study further interrogates the Islamic inheritance system, addressing widespread misconceptions and demonstrating how its fixed shares and legal safeguards provide women with enforceable economic rights within a broader network of familial responsibilities. Employing a qualitative analytical methodology, the research situates these principles within Nigeria's socio-cultural realities, assessing both their transformative potential and the challenges posed by patriarchal customs, limited legal literacy and uneven implementation at community and institutional levels. The findings reveal that when properly understood and applied, Islamic wealth-distribution principles offer gender-responsive pathways to economic justice and significantly enhance women's financial stability and agency. The paper concludes by recommending context-sensitive interpretation, community education and inclusive policy engagement that uphold Islamic spiritual values while advancing contemporary gender equity goals in Nigeria.

4. Adjudicating Spiritual Authenticity: A Critical-Realist, Mechanism-Based Method for Studying Mystical Claims

Tomilola Fadipe* and **Ali Qadir** · *Tampere University*

The study of spirituality faces a persistent theoretical and methodological challenge: how to analyze the authenticity of spiritual claims without reducing it to either a private, ineffable experience or a mere social label. This dilemma is acute in cases of mysticism, where claims resist straightforward verification yet have significant public consequences. This paper proposes a way forward through a critical realist, mechanism-based framework. We reframe authenticity as a dynamic process of social mediation, generated through the interplay of embodied practice repertoires and public mechanisms of adjudication. We specify three of such mechanisms: translation work (the rhetorical and aesthetic labor that renders experiences legible), testimony economies (the social organization of credible witnessing), and institutional sponsorship (the routinization of recognition through endorsements, commemorations, and infrastructures). We illustrate this framework's utility with a historical-contemporary case of the contested legacy of Nigerian prophet Joseph Ayo Babalola (1904-1959). Analyzing a diverse corpus, including archival records, denominational statements, sermons, oral histories, and media reports (1928-2025), we first reconstruct his ascetic practice repertoire (fasting, night vigils, visions, "living water," bell). Second, we map how different "valuation regimes" (holiness, prosperity/efficacy, legal-administrative, orthodoxy/lineage) and gatekeepers (denominational

councils, colonial or state officials, prominent pastors, journalists) convert tests into endorsements or sanctions across church, media, and state arenas. We anticipate showing that experiential depth alone does not secure authenticity; durability arises when repertoire and mechanisms co-activate under regime-appropriate criteria, whereas misrecognition occurs when claims are judged by non-native standards. The contribution is a replicable method and portable theory for analyzing the adjudication of spiritual authenticity that moves beyond the interiority/discourse binary, with clear utility for spirituality studies within and beyond the African context.

Classroom 18 Engaging Adriaan van Klinken's Book — Decolonizing Christianities in Contemporary Nigerian Literature

Chair: Emmanuel Erhijodo, University of Leeds & Zaynab Ango, University of Abuja

Panel abstract

The book, Decolonizing Christianities in Contemporary Nigerian Literature (2025) by Adriaan van Klinken, explores Christianity in contemporary African literary production. The text is a valuable addition to the ongoing conversations on Christian traditions and practices in Africa. Reflecting on the complexities of the religion across Africa and the African diaspora, van Klinken positions Nigeria as a microcosm of the wider continent in his decolonial examination of Christianity in multicultural and pluralistic contexts. The book's interdisciplinary approach draws on literary representations by writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Okey Ndibe, and Chinelo Okparanta, in close conversation with the works of major African theologians, philosophers, and social theorists, to address pertinent questions around contemporary Christianity and Postcolonial Africans' lived experiences. The roundtable will, therefore, engage with this text, which constitutes a timely intervention in the ongoing discourse on the decolonization and reimagination of Christianity in Africa. In engaging the text from multidisciplinary perspectives, panellists on the roundtable will critically discuss and reflect on this book, its methodology, arguments, and its themes of literature and Christianity in relation to postcolonial Africans' lived experiences of war and civil unrest, ecology, resource control and exploitation, gender, sexuality, and interreligious relations.

Participants

Contributors

- Abel Ugba, University of Leeds
- Benson Igboin, Adekunle Ajasin University
- Nathanael Homewood, University of Minnesota
- Ibukunolu Isaac Olodude, Obafemi Awolowo University
- Nonki Motahane, University of the Free State
- Mariam Magaji, University of Abuja

Meeting Room 03 Indigenous Traditions, Gender and Spirituality*Chair: Margaret Effungani, St Paul's University Limuru Kenya/PROCMURA***1. Taming the Gods: Brandishing Human Agency in Indigenous Igbo (African) Spiritualities****Donald Mark C. Ude** · *KU Leuven*

John Mbiti's now 'notorious' claim that Africans are "notoriously religious" may have fuelled the assumption that, in indigenous African religions and spiritualities, humans submit themselves unquestioningly to dictates of the gods and their representatives. Following this line of thinking, it is supposed that humans (Africans) are miserable and vulnerable puppets easily manipulated by the gods and their human agents. Nothing is further from the truth! In this paper, I challenge this wrongheaded view by presenting an alternative account of indigenous African spiritualities, demonstrating that humans (Africans) indeed assert themselves firmly, brandishing their agency and pushing back an otherwise overbearing power of deities and supernatural forces. To argue this point, I make a case study of indigenous Igbo spiritualities, exploring its features that serve the purpose of 'taming' the gods, while strengthening the bargaining position of humans. I draw on the works of Chinua Achebe and relevant scholarship on indigenous Igbo religiosities/spiritualities to highlight the capacity of the Igbo individuals to challenge and reinterpret oracular messages, their courage to 'punish' the gods when the latter are perceived to be highhanded or overbearing. I also underscore Igbo transactional approach to religion which empowers humans to seek alternatives when certain gods or spiritual frameworks becomes so ineffectual that they could no longer secure the overall good of the community. Finally, I uncover certain indigenous Igbo religious and epistemic resources that make powersharing between the divine and the human possible – resources that indeed serve to curtail the otherwise immense power of the divine. Cumulatively, the foregoing points are meant to buttress the case that indigenous African spiritualities (with Igbo spiritualities as a placeholder) empower humans to wield their agency. This at the same time represents a mechanism for establishing the much-needed checks in the practice of religion – in other words, a mechanism for 'taming the gods' as it were.

2. The Roles of Women in African Traditional Religion: A case study of the Varembe (Lemba) people in Mberengwa District, Zimbabwe**Siphehlwe Hove*** and **Muchabaiwa Wonder** · *Midlands State University*

This qualitative study explores the multifaceted roles of women within African Traditional Religion, focusing specifically on the Varembe (Lemba) people of Mberengwa District, Zimbabwe, through an interpretivist lens. Utilizing methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, data were collected from a diverse sample of twenty participants, including the chief, women, men, and headmen. The study combines the gender intersectionality perspective and African feminism to illuminate the gender dynamics in Varembe women's roles in African Traditional Religious ceremonies and practices. Thematic analysis was employed to elucidate the findings, which revealed that women predominantly engage in household responsibilities, particularly during cultural ceremonies, and play a vital role in transmitting cultural values and practices to young girls. This includes educating them about traditional expectations related to marriage, domesticity, and preparation for future roles as wives. The study highlights that while Varembe women are central to cultural continuity, their involvement is primarily constrained to traditional domestic roles. Thus, while Varembe women play vital roles in the religious and cultural fabric of the Varembe community, underlying patriarchal dynamics and gender stereotypes continue to undermine their contributions. Recommendations advocate for the inclusion of Varembe women in decision-making processes related to cultural practices, recognizing their agency as full human beings rather than mere facilitators of familial and cultural expectations. This research contributes significantly to the understanding of Varembe culture, emphasizing its resilience in the face of globalization and modernity while advocating for gender equity in cultural participation and leadership roles for women alongside their male counterparts.

3. Surnames, Gender and Identity in Pre-colonial Owan Traditional Religion

Benson Ohihon Igboin · Adekunle Ajasin University

Scholars have posited that traditional Africans pay critical attention to naming. They argue that names are intricately connected with human destiny and as such, they consciously name their children to reflect their expectations from them. Although there are counter-arguments to the effect that names may not necessarily connect with human destiny, the politics, spirituality and gender identity of surnames have not been given much scholarly attention, particularly among the Owan people of Nigeria. Located in northern senatorial district of Edo state in southern Nigeria, there is a grain of evidence that Owan communities could have substantially been matrilineal sometimes in precolonial times before the introduction of surnames. This study, therefore, investigates the controversial emergence and politicisation of surnames in Owan, and demonstrates how the institutionalisation of surnames has redrawn gender, spirituality and identity. Employing historical and ethnographical methods, it is posited that the introduction of surnames by early Christian missionaries and their formalisation by British colonialists changed the Owan socio-religious worldview.

4. Fluidity of gender in the Sengwer indigenous peoples' spirituality in the Cherangany hills, Kenya

King'asia Mamati · Goethe University Frankfurt

This article examines the fluidity of gender in Sengwer spirituality, unsettling and going beyond the binary way of knowing and understanding gender. The article also discusses how this fluidity of gender is reflected in rituals that enhanced a cordial and harmonious human environment and relations among the Sengwer peoples in Cherangany region. Data for this article was gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted between January-July 2022. Based on an anthropocosmic approach, the paper addresses how Christianity introduced strict patriarchal gender concepts of God, which the Sengwer have innovatively reimaged through a syncretic blending of Christian faith and indigenous beliefs. This has resulted in a fluid conceptualisation of God that transcends Western strict patriarchal gender constructs. Findings reveal that in Sengwer cosmology, God (Asiis) assumes a complex and fluid gender form, distinct from rigid Western anthropocentric frameworks. A central concept in the Sengwer cosmology is Asiis, also known as Chebet Chemataw—meaning "the unseen one." Asiis can also take a feminine form, as suggested by the name Chebet chebo Chemataw, which means "Chebet, the daughter of Chemataw." Such fluid gendered cosmological understanding fosters environmental stewardship by instilling a deep sense of responsibility toward deities and ecological ethics. Evidence of this is observed in rituals performed during droughts which reflect fluid gender dimensions in both ritual items and participants. Based on this gender fluidity in Sengwer spirituality, it could be used as a tool to enhance interfaith religious coexistence, thereby enhancing both human and non-human life.

Classroom 16 Transnational Youth, Spirituality, Gender and Agency — African Migrant Religious Lives Across Home and Diaspora

Chair: Dominic Pasura, University of Glasgow

Panel abstract

This panel offers a comparative and transnational examination of how spirituality shapes gendered forms of agency among young people (15–35) of Nigerian and Zimbabwean migrant backgrounds across migrant-receiving and migrant-origin settings. Drawing on multi-sited qualitative research in London and Birmingham (UK), Lagos (Nigeria), and Johannesburg (South Africa), the panel foregrounds spirituality as lived, embodied, and relational practice rather than institutional affiliation alone. We bring scholarship on African religions, migration, and youth into conversation with intersectional analyses attentive to generation (first- and second-generation), gender, class, mobility and precarity. Across these contexts, young people mobilise Christian and hybrid spiritual repertoires to negotiate belonging, rework family and community expectations, heal trauma, and imagine viable futures amid racialisation, xenophobia, economic instability, and patriarchal constraint. The papers trace diverse but interconnected sites of spiritual agency: second-generation youth navigating diasporic Christianity and gendered belonging in the UK; Lagos youth engaging spirituality as a resource for economic agency and "hustle"; migrant youth in Johannesburg confronting xenophobia and exclusion while building adaptive religious practices and support networks; and a comparative synthesis that shows how gendered spiritual authority is produced, contested, and reconfigured across

Africa and the diaspora, including through digital and hybrid religious spaces. Collectively, the panel contributes to debates on spirituality and empowerment, gender dynamics in contemporary African Christianities, and the ways African youth actively reshape spiritual landscapes within and beyond the continent. It also demonstrates how "agency" is enacted under constraint—through endurance, tactical adaptation, care, reinterpretation, and selective participation—rather than only through overt resistance.

1. Black British but Spiritually African: Youth, Religion, and Gendered Belonging in London and Birmingham

Nomatter Sande, Sarah Kazira and Dominic Pasura · *University of Glasgow*

This paper explores how young people of Nigerian and Zimbabwean backgrounds in London and Birmingham negotiate spirituality, gendered identity, and belonging in a secular and racialised diaspora. Drawing on qualitative interviews, we argue that these youth exercise agency by selectively hybridising African spiritual repertoires with local British realities—crafting forms of lived spirituality that are simultaneously diasporic, future-oriented, and responsive to everyday constraints. Guided by intersectional theory, the analysis attends to the interplay of gender, generation, class mobility, and precarity in shaping religious practice and meaning-making. The findings point to a notable generational shift: while parents tend to sustain "rule-based" religious commitments rooted in institutional authority and moral regulation, young people increasingly emphasise "relationship-based" spirituality, understood as personal, affective, and flexible. We show how this transition is deeply gendered. Young women and men draw on religion and spirituality to contest patriarchal expectations, negotiate modesty norms, and reinterpret cultural obligations, while also using digital platforms to curate autonomous spiritual communities and peer networks beyond family and church control. Belonging emerges as layered and ambivalent. Participants describe themselves as a "sandwiched generation," often feeling "too British" for ancestral homelands yet "too African" within multicultural Britain. We argue that spiritual agency functions as a form of tactical adaptation under constraint: it enables youth to manage exclusion and racialisation, rework gendered subjectivities, and imagine viable futures across home and diaspora. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates on transnational youth, lived religion, and gendered agency in contemporary African diasporas.

2. Faith, Hustle and Hope: Spirituality and Economic Agency among Youth in Lagos and Harare

Ntongha Eni Ikpi and Reggemore Marongedze, · *University of Calabar, University of Zimbabwe*

This paper analyses how left-behind youth in Lagos (Nigeria) and Harare (Zimbabwe) mobilise spirituality for economic agency in contexts shaped by precarity. It contends that spirituality operates not merely as consolation but as a practical and gendered repertoire through which young people interpret hardship, discipline the self and pursue economic possibility amid constrained opportunities. By foregrounding youth who remain geographically immobile while embedded in transnational family arrangements, the paper centres immobility as an analytical lens in the study of African religions, migration and agency. Empirically, the paper draws on qualitative material generated through semi-structured interviews, life-history narratives and informal ethnographic engagement with young people (18–35years) in Lagos and Harare whose parents have migrated abroad. The analysis attends to everyday spiritual practices and digitally mediated worship that frame economic "hustling," endurance and aspiration. Gender is central to these dynamics; young women often articulate spirituality as moral labour tied to respectability, patience and care, while young men invoke spiritual discipline to sustain narratives of future provision, mobility and masculine responsibility. The paper demonstrates how spiritual idioms of destiny, sacrifice and divine timing enable youth to convert waiting into purposeful action, sustaining hope while legitimising participation in informal economies and entrepreneurial pursuits. These spiritual frames also individualise structural inequality, placing moral responsibility for success or failure on the self. The paper's key contribution lies in demonstrating how left-behind youth in African urban contexts actively rework spirituality as an economic and ethical technology of agency, rather than passive inheritance. In doing so, it advances debates on spirituality, gender and youth agency in contemporary African religious life.

3. Johannesburg as Spiritual Crossroads: Migration, Xenophobia and Youth Religious Agency

Primrose Sibusisiwe Mlambo and Bernard Matolino · *University of Pretoria*

Migration exposes African migrants and refugees to everyday precarity, hostility, and, in South Africa, recurring episodes of xenophobic violence. Yet in contexts where access to work, documentation, healthcare, and secure housing is routinely blocked, religion often remains one of the few institutions through which young migrants can pursue

dignity, protection, and a sense of belonging. This paper examines Johannesburg as a "spiritual crossroads," asking how religious communities shape—and are shaped by—the lived experiences of Nigerian and Zimbabwean youth navigating xenophobia and structural exclusion. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork with young migrants and key informants, the paper analyses how churches and faith-based organisations mediate migrants' encounters with the state and with local communities. We focus on four interconnected arenas of everyday struggle: (1) documentation regimes and the threat of arrest and deportation; (2) access to healthcare and other basic services; (3) everyday surveillance and the invasion of personal space in neighbourhoods and workplaces; and (4) the ambivalent role of faith communities as both infrastructures of care and sites where exclusionary narratives may circulate. We show that religion and spirituality operate simultaneously as emotional support, moral claim-making, and a platform for social and political voice—enabling young migrants to negotiate inclusion, rework identity, and cultivate collective resilience amid hostility. By foregrounding youth religious agency in a major African migrant destination, the paper contributes to debates on transnational religion, gendered experiences of mobility, and the uneven politics of belonging in the Global South.

4. Gender, Spiritual Authority and Youth Agency in African Christianities Across Africa and the Diaspora

Dodeye Williams and Ezra Chitando · University of Calabar, University of Zimbabwe

Young people are challenging gendered hierarchies within the church in Africa. This paper examines the intersections of gender, spiritual authority, and youth agency within African Christianities, both on the continent and in the diaspora. How young people navigate religious hierarchies, reinterpret spiritual authority, and assert agency significantly shape their political, social, cultural, and spiritual lives. The paper discusses how diasporic networks, social media, and migration intersect with local religious practices to create new spaces for youth engagement. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and data from a study on the religious and spiritual lives of transnational young people of African migrant backgrounds in Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the United Kingdom, it highlights the dynamic relationship between generational change, spiritual leadership, and gendered social structures. It focuses on prayer and worship practices, dressing, music preferences, social media, digital engagement, and other forms of religious expression among young Christians in these contexts. By doing so, the paper provides new insights into how they influence the modern character of Christian communities, reshaping traditional authority, gender norms, and religious expression across Africa and the Diaspora, advancing scholarly understanding of contemporary African Christianities and the role of youth in shaping their futures.

Classroom 17 Literary and Musical Representations of Religious Agency in Gender and Sexuality

Chair: Adriaan van Klinken, University of Leeds

Panel abstract

This panel presents papers with a particular focus on the way in which literary and musical texts represent religious agency in relation to critical issues of identity, gender and sexuality in various African and diaspora contexts. Collectively, the papers in this panel offer a fascinating insight into cultural production as a major resource for meaning-making and world-making in contemporary African contexts, especially in relation to issues often deemed as socially, politically, culturally and religiously controversial.

1. Representation and Appropriation: Islam and Queer Agency in Hausa Digital Novels

Zaynab Ango · University of Abuja

This paper examines the centrality of Islam to queer agency in two Hausa digital novels, Auren Jinsi (2018) and Danyen Kasko (2022). The Hausa culture in Northern Nigeria has for centuries been shaped by Islamic teachings which regulate gender identities, sexual relations and orientations. Yet, this paper contends that Islam is amenable to queer agency, as portrayed in the novels. The paper further contends that the emergence of digital publishing; its offerings of anonymity and accessibility now offers a medium for self-assertion that is deconstructing heteronormative hermeneutics. Drawing from postcolonial theorization of appropriation, the paper unpacks the author's strategies of reinterpreting Qur'anic injunctions to challenge heteronormative discourses and negotiate queer identities and moral authority within Islam. This unveils religion as a "productive site for queer agency", and digital literature as an archive for Hausa queer lived experience.

2. 'I had a million selves, too many to gather': Spirituality and Unsettled Diasporic Identities in Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*

Nonki Motahane · *University of the Free State*

*Literary representations focusing on the interplay between migration and spirituality are prominent in postcolonial African diasporic literatures. However, within scholarship, this nexus has received little attention. Yaa Gyasi's novel, *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) explores African diasporic experiences through characters who navigate displacement, belonging, alienation and conflicting spiritual and religious perspectives. The characters navigate the challenges of migration, grief and alienation. This paper interprets this connection in the novel using Paul Gilroy's concept of double consciousness and Homi Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity, to explore the intricate intersections of spirituality and the (re)negotiation of contemporary diasporic identities. The paper argues that Gyasi deploys spiritual aesthetics, scientific tensions, and existentialism to highlight how, in the context of migration, spiritual practices provide alternative understandings of complex African diasporic experiences. My analysis of the conflicted and conflicting diasporic negotiations focuses on spirituality as a site of healing, resistance and existential inquiry to enhance and complexify extant discourse on migration, spirituality and Black female agency in the novel.*

3. When Women Speak: Feminising Political Vitality and Spiritual Renewal in Zimbabwean Politics

Tsiidzai Matsika · *University of Zimbabwe*

*This study explores the intersection of gender, spirituality, and agency within Zimbabwe's socio-political landscapes in NoViolet Bulawayo's (2013) novel *We Need New Names*, a literary text, alongside Joice Mujuru's *Blueprint to Unlock Investment and Leverage for Development (BUILD)* (2015) and *Inclusive Development Agenda (IDEA)* (2018) political manifestos from a woman-led political party to highlight the transformative power of women's voices. By juxtaposing a literary text with political manifestos, this research highlights the transformative power of women's voices in shaping national narratives, demonstrating how cultural, spiritual, and political expressions converge to articulate women's agency in varying platforms. Bulawayo's text offers a nuanced portrayal of Zimbabweans' lived experiences, capturing their resilience and resistance amid socio-political upheaval. It foregrounds the structural and patriarchal constraints that continue to marginalise women's contributions while underscoring the capacity of women's narratives to envision alternative social realities. In parallel, Mujuru's manifestos offer insight into women's practical engagement with governance, articulating a vision of political leadership rooted in spiritual renewal, inclusive development, and gender equity. Her emphasis on women's empowerment and participatory governance challenges entrenched power hierarchies and demonstrates the potential of women's agency to effect systemic transformation. The juxtaposition of these texts is theoretically justified through African feminist theology, which foregrounds women's lived experiences, spiritual authority, and socio-political participation as central to ethical and transformative leadership. Together, these texts illuminate how women's voices, both literary and political, vitalise Zimbabwean political and spiritual discourse. Both authors advocate for renewal and a more equitable, spiritually grounded national development where women's agency is central.*

4. Analysis of Gendered Perspectives in African Religious Songs: A Case of the Kikuyu Ethnic Community

Pharis Murangai · *Taita Taveta University*

The Agikuyu ethnic community's traditional ceremonies, vernacular electronic media houses programmes, social media sites, worship in churches, and other social events are significantly characterized by religious songs. Lyrics in songs carry and hand down history, express emotions, provide identities, and cultivate and maintain social relations. They can therefore be used to foster spiritual empowerment that inspires community members to embrace new, alternative perspectives and practices that promote gender inclusivity. Lyrics can also advance aspects of marginalization and disempowerment based on gender. The paper assesses the possibilities, limits, and tensions in Agikuyu religious songs on gender. The analysis is guided by social construction theory, which was used to evaluate the use of lyrics to communicate messages that sustain the community's gender perspectives and practices. The analyzed data were drawn from a sample of the community's traditional and contemporary religious songs, as well as other documented sources. From the findings, some lyrics convey messages that communicate the desired change, including calls for gender empowerment. Women are conscious of the opportunity through songs to educate the community on the need for gender equality and equity. There are women and men who are composing contemporary religious songs to articulate gender issues in the community. While the future of lyrics in religious songs within the Kikuyu ethnic

community has the potential to enhance agency, there are risks that some aspects may sustain marginalization and disempowerment. There are nuances in lyrics that promote patriarchy and hence sustain inequalities along gender lines.

Classroom 18 Christianity, Power and Agency

Chair: Doreen Sesiro, University of Botswana

1. Nurturing as Purpose: Spirituality, Gendered Agency, and the Healing Practices of Christian Women at the University of Botswana

Lebogang Moeti · *University of Botswana*

This paper explores how Christian women at the University of Botswana construct and live out their sense of purpose through nurturing, care, and healing practices as a central expression of spiritual purpose, gendered agency, and healing practice within their everyday lived experiences. Drawing on findings from an interpretive phenomenological doctoral study on spirituality, mental health, and purpose among UB Christian students and staff members. This paper highlights women's lived experiences of purpose as deeply inclined to care, relational, spiritually informed, and oriented toward the well-being of others. Participants expressed purpose not principally in individualistic terms, but as a calling to nurture, sustain, and heal within families, churches, and broader community spaces. Guided by interpretive phenomenology and enriched through reflexive engagement. The analysis reveals nurturing as an expression of gendered agency rather than merely a domestic expectation. Women's narratives, therefore, demonstrate how spirituality shapes moral values, resilience, and meaning-making, helping them to exercise agency through care giving, emotional labour, gift-giving, and healing practices in contexts characterized by academic, social, and psychological pressures. These expressions of purpose are deeply embedded in African relational philosophies, especially the Botho/Ubuntu ethic. It posits that personhood and fulfilment are realised through mutual interconnectedness and a commitment to the well-being of others. The paper argues that nurturing, within the context of Christian women at the University of Botswana, serves as a spiritually grounded healing practice. This viewpoint challenges narrow, individual-centred conceptions of agency and purpose. The study contributes to scholarship on gender, agency, and healing in contemporary Africa. It further highlights the importance of recognising gendered spiritual practices as valuable resources for mental health and well-being within higher education institutions.

2. Intersection of the Performance of Political Power and Christian Spirituality in the Lives of Women in Africa and Beyond

Maria Frahm-Arp · *University of Johannesburg*

At the end of the twentieth century Ursula King (2008:128) noted that women were engaging in a variety of spiritualities which enabled them to develop their own spiritual understandings, pathways to holiness and even liberation. Almost twenty years after King's research this paper draws on research from two very different forms of Christian spirituality to examine how, if at all, Christian spiritualities were intersecting with the performance of political power in the lives of women both in Africa and beyond. The methodology for this research was to examine two types of Christian spiritualities: Contemplative and Prophetic Pentecostal Christianity. Over a period of three years the teaching of James Finley on Contemplative Christianity via the Centre for Action and Contemplation's online podcasts and the teaching at Rabboni Ministries, a solely online international Prophetic Pentecostal Church, were downloaded as well as the questions, testimonies and social media comments women posted on these sites. Teachings, comments, questions and testimonies which specifically spoke to issues of women, spirituality and the performance of political power were then analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis. This paper shows that as women grew in their sense of commitment to and understanding of either type of spirituality they expressed a deeper understanding of and exercising of their own political power. The paper argues that committed and sustained engagement with spirituality often positively deepens women's sense of agency, liberation and self-worth which also positively informs how they exercised their own political power in their everyday lives.

3. Female Gods, Gendered Bodies: The Status of Women, Christianity and Queer Being(s)

Chukwudera Samuel Nwodo · University of the Western Cape

African women and queer Africans across the globe share lived realities that feature the highest forms of violence, injustices, inequality and oppression. The Global North is highly reported as having steadily succeeded in good governance, development, secularisation, human rights, gender equality, and recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals in the public and private spheres (Tamale, 2020). The Global South, on the other hand, is reported mainly as endangered with issues of corruption, gender-based violence, the criminalisation of LGBTQ+ individuals, feminisation of poverty and the spiralling loss of life due to the violent crimes mainly committed by men (Tamale, 2020). This ongoing 'toxicity' of socio-cultural and political-economic pathologies is indicative of complex power relations, especially in colonised regions, by which heteropatriarchal structures and sexism are transferred values and, as such, colonise the minds and reality of post-colonial societies. Therefore, it becomes imperative to trace the anchored colonial pathogeny from the past and connect it to the present workings of decolonisation to decolonial thought. This paper will engage with critical discussions, which deconstruct the colonial impositions of religion, gender, sexuality and race through a thematic decolonial prose, by revisiting the indigenous epistemological and ontological understandings of our pre-Western colonial social African world, before the advent of Western Christianity in non-Western societies, particularly Africa. The paper, therefore, asserts that the idea of gender as it is understood today still shows the continuation of violence in connection with the coloniality of gender and be-ing to embrace the falsehoods of heteropatriarchal sexism as the norm of modern Africa.

4. 'I feel, right in my innermost being, they are my sisters': Open Brethren Faith, Gender, and Indigenous Dialogue in Katanga, 1896--1936

Andrew Leslie Craig · Queen's University Belfast

This paper examines the rich dialogues that took place between Open Brethren missionaries and the indigenous Luba people in the Katanga province of the Belgian Congo. Hitherto, no academic work has been conducted on Open Brethren gender dynamics, nor on how those dynamics interacted with Luba conceptions of gender. This paper adopts an intersectional and 'reflexive decolonial approach' (Fosu, 2025) to expand the discussion on gender relations between missionary and indigenous. Drawing upon extensive missionary sources, private manuscript letters, and Luba ethnographies, I seek to demonstrate the phenomenon of 'missionary entanglement' with indigenous modes of knowledge and spirituality (Tilson, 2024). I will focus particularly on how Luba men and women engaged with Grace and Dan Crawford, a Brethren missionary couple who operated in Luanza from 1896-1936.

Session IV · Wednesday 29 July · 13:15–14:45

Meeting Room 03 Religion, Spirituality and Political Life

Chair: Siamisang Saudu, University of Botswana

1. Beyond the Elitist Gaze: Spirituality, Agency, and Nigerian Politics

Adam Olowo · University of Cambridge

While the spirituality of the Nigerian public sphere has been considerably explored in literature, contemporary scholarship remains constrained by its over-reliance on a one-dimensional framework. Since the ascendancy of Pentecostal Christianity as a formidable political force in Nigeria—vis-à-vis Islam—and its radical politics against nearly everything perceived as "unchristian," the Nigerian Fourth Republic acquired a distinctive religious garb, to the point where both media and political analysts now designate religion as the ultimate driver of Nigerian politics. Without necessarily challenging the factual assertion embedded in this claim, this paper argues that its fundamental premise is significantly flawed. Contending that existing research relies too heavily on a narrow or, perhaps, elitist framing of the subject—primarily derived from media sources and pronouncements from both the theocratic class and political elites—this paper, by drawing on original fieldwork, wishes to create a critical angle to it. It takes the debate to the grassroots level where local politics is made with an aim to thicken the conversation beyond the elitist gaze of current works, thereby offering fresh and nuanced insights into the complex relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria. Through a broader, more panoramic lens, this paper sheds light on how religious spirituality actually

influences democratic values and political participation in Nigeria and to what extent it does. It also illuminates the often-overlooked domain of political 'affect' i.e. voter's political agency and autonomy within this spiritually charged public square and interrogates whether or not this can transcend spiritual patronage. The central objective of this paper is to problematize narratives that exclusively attribute political participation to voters' spirituality while marginalizing other factors as somehow external or secondary tools of politicization in Nigeria.

2. Engaging the Nexus Between Religion and Spirituality in Nation's Development and Growth: A Critical Analysis of Religious Activism in Nigeria

Danoye Oguntola-Laguda · *Lagos State University*

This work critically evaluates the role of religious activism in addressing the social, cultural, economic, and political challenges confronting Nigeria as a nation. The analysis is grounded in J. Milton Yinger's social theory of counterculture (1982), which emerges from religion and spiritualism. The study hypothesizes that when state actors; particularly, political leaders fail to fulfil their electoral promises, they often resort to religion as a means of negotiation with the populace. The subsequent failure of religion to adequately address societal issues can lead to the emergence of spirituality as a subculture, which may evolve into a counterculture. The study explores the historical evolution, meaning, and value of religion and spirituality in Nigeria, examining how these institutions and individual or group spirituality influence national development and growth. Nigeria currently faces significant insecurity, ranging from terrorism in the Northeast, herders' and farmers' clashes in the Southwest and Southeast, to kidnapping and armed robbery, highlighting the failure of political leaders to provide security. The economy remains stagnant, and political stability is fragile. In response, some Nigerians have turned to religion, seeking divine intervention. However, in recent times, religion as a social institution appears to have failed in alleviating the people's plight, prompting a shift towards spirituality as a form of activism. This shift manifests in individuals and groups leveraging spirituality and religion in their efforts to address national problems. The study employs a historical and critical methodology, complemented by an analytical approach, to examine the concepts of religion, spirituality, and their impact on Nigeria's development. Analyzing religious practices, activism, and spiritual movements within the socio-political context, the study aims to uncover the complex relationship between faith-based initiatives and the nation's progress.

3. Leveraging African Spirituality Towards an Alternative Pan African Economic Growth

Zorodzai Dube · *University of the Free State*

The paper proposes an alternative economic model underpinned by social cohesion, harmony and morality. Global capitalistic economic growth is premised on values of competition and individualism resulting in a trickle-down economic model. Drawing on paradigms such as ujamaa and ubuntu, this paper suggests that aspects of African spirituality of collective survival, collective well-being, shared resources, and social responsibility provide a plausible and alternative economic growth model for Africa. Using this perspective, economic growth shifts from individual success to collective survival, social cohesion, harmony and morality.

4. Professional Bodies, Sacred Selves: Discourses of Spirituality in Women's Media Work

Edidiong Ibanga · *University of Bayreuth*

This essay explores the intersection between lived spirituality and the professional world in women's media work in Liberia during the 1980s. Drawing on historical records and interviews with journalists at the Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS), this paper argues that notions of professionalism encompassed more than just secular occupational standards; they also infused the spiritual to frame notions of self-control and moral self-determination. Given the absence of specific regulations on the official dress code and appearance in the media workplace, women journalists developed norms of propriety and conduct grounded in self-control, respect, and moral obligation. By making professional appearance a daily spiritual practice, these norms formed a discourse of spirituality that worked through the body. The study places these activities within discussions of modernity in Africa, and demonstrates how the 80s "modern woman" was distinguished by minimalism rather than effusiveness and discipline rather than display. For women journalists, being prominent on television included the (spiritual) responsibility to set an example of morality, especially for young viewers. Television, therefore, became a spiritual pedagogical environment where values were taught via visual repetition and embodied example rather than through overt religious instruction. The study also explores spiritual metaphors in fashion, such as the association between flamboyant appearance and moral instability and witchcraft. According to these discourses, African spiritual cosmologies were used to control women's bodies.

Moreso, both women and men played agentic roles in these regulations. This study, therefore, questions secular perspectives on media work and advances research on spirituality, gender, and labour by showing how spirituality permeates professional spaces beyond established religious organisations to influence public authority and professional ethics.

Classroom 16 Cosmology, Philosophy and Spirituality

Chair: Nelly Mwale

1. Metaphysical Personhood and Gender in Botho Thought: African Cosmology

Doreen Sesiro · *University of Botswana*

In this paper I explore metaphysical personhood within Botho philosophical thought and examine its relationship to gender. I will distinguish different contexts or meanings of personhood, namely, the metaphysical and moral personhood. This owes to the fact that, discussions involving personhood frequently employ both metaphysical and moral aspect of the concept in question. Drawing from the metaphysical perspective of Botho, I explain that personhood is constituted through relationality and immateriality rather than biological or gendered attributes. Whereas relationality especially as expressed through Botho, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings, including humans, nature, and spirits, immateriality in this broader context includes the concepts of life force and spirituality. I argue that metaphysical personhood in Botho is not inherently gendered. I will show that gender distinctions tend to emerge more in moral personhood, rather than in the metaphysical personhood. Gender becomes relevant in the ethical and social expressions of personhood, where cultural norms and spiritual practices shape gendered roles and expectations. For example, many African societies assign gender-specific moral responsibilities, such as caregiving, leadership, or ritual roles. These gender distinctions do not define the metaphysical essence of being. Metaphysical personhood in contrast offer an inclusive model of personhood that respects gender diversity without reducing identity to biological or social categories. It also affirms the dignity and personhood of all individuals regardless of gender. This paper will contribute to contemporary debates in African philosophy, gender and metaphysics.

2. The Re-conceptualization of African Spirituality: Beyond Religion, Towards Cosmology

Letlhogonolo Phiri · *University of South Africa*

In African scholarship, predominant definitions of African spirituality are often rooted in Eurocentric frameworks and heavily rely on popular nomenclature, which continues to misrepresent and constrain the essential meaning of the embodiment. If not regarded as African Traditional Religion, African spirituality is often narrowly associated with African traditional healing (Ubugoma) or Sangoma practices. These square with popular western ideals where constructs such as "religion" – a highly contested term from an African cosmic perspective, and "Sangomahood" tend to be understood as representing African spirituality, whereas that is not the case. Using auto-ethnography as a qualitative research approach, I draw from my personal experiences, memories and stories to (1) contextualize the concept of African spirituality, (2) embed African spirituality within the theory of consciousness, and (3) to propose a move away from the use of religion towards an African cosmological underpinning.

3. Questioning the Religion--Spirituality Divide: Methodological Reflections from Japanese Religious Studies

Satoko Fujiwara · *University of Tokyo*

Recent scholarly turns to "spirituality" have been welcomed as a corrective to belief-centered, institutional definitions of religion, foregrounding lived, embodied, and experiential practices. While this move has opened important analytical space, this paper argues that the religion--spirituality dichotomy itself risks reproducing conceptual legacies rooted in Western Christian histories, particularly the opposition between church and mysticism. Drawing on Japanese religious studies as a comparative and methodological intervention, I suggest that both "religion" and "spirituality" can obscure forms of sacrality that do not hinge on interior belief, personal transcendence, or a subject--object division. Japanese scholars of religion have long been reluctant to deploy the concept of animism when analyzing Japanese traditions. Sacred mountains, forests, or objects are not treated as revered because they are inhabited by discrete spirits or souls; rather, they are apprehended as sacred in themselves, without requiring a metaphysics of indwelling

entities. This scholarly hesitation reflects a broader methodological resistance to translating Japanese practices into categories that presuppose hidden essences, interiorized spirituality, or individualized experience. Importantly, such practices are also not easily captured by the modern notion of "spirituality" as personal, affective, or privatized religiosity. Building on this, I propose the concept of "post-spirituality" as an analytic orientation rather than a new substantive category. Post-spirituality names forms of religiosity that exceed both institutional religion and individualized spirituality, emphasizing relationality, materiality, and situational engagement with the sacred without recourse to belief, inner experience, or mystical depth. By presenting Japanese cases in this way, the paper invites scholars working on African religious contexts to think together about how similar binaries may enable, but also constrain, our shared efforts to conceptualize lived religious practices, gendered agency, and sacrality across diverse contexts.

4. The Afrikaner's Adjusting Aperture: A Multidisciplinary Spiritscape

Annalie Steenkamp-Nel · University of Pretoria

In post-apartheid South Africa the previously advantaged group, the 'Afrikaners,' are transitioning towards a new paradigm, usually characterized by integrative governmental approaches to social innovation, legislative reforms, pro-poor solutions, and distributiveness. There is a shift, though. The group's collective paradigm, seldom associated with shifts in underlying spiritual aperture, is adjusting. The aim of this paper was to review the underexplored theme of how Afrikaners' spiritual transformation affects adaptation amidst growing complexity and uncertainty. Reflections of scholars in the fields of theology, Christian spirituality, theatre and performance, and anthropology were surveyed. Through the bifocal lens of metamodernism and the Spiritual Transformation Approach (STA), the ethnic minority's evolving spiritual identity was examined. The two theoretical frameworks enabled a nuanced understanding of Afrikaners' spiritual movement: First, developing spiritual agencies' impact on society—its refractions and remaniements were probed. A pivotal middle section explored spiritual alterations as lived experience in relation to deeper perceptions and sacred connections. Finally, key recalibrations regarding the role of spiritual rituals and embodied practices in shaping Afrikaner expressions were analyzed. Implications of African societies' spiritual transformation can be threefold: The two approaches have the potential to contribute towards the promotion of the study of religions in Africa. Then, a metamodernistic understanding and STA have the capacity to foster cross-disciplinary dialogue between diverse spiritualities and spiritual practices in Africa. Afrikaner spirituality's processual aspect has the ability to contribute towards a renewed focus within, across, and beyond Africa's spiritscapes.

Classroom 17 Lived Religion and Gendered Agency

Chair: Damaris Parsitau, Calvin University

Panel abstract

The papers in this panel explore gendered agency from the perspective of lived religion, in a diversity of spaces, such as ritual, educational, church and online. Demonstrating the creativity and inventiveness with which ordinary people do religion in their everyday lives and communities also offers insight into the multiple and complex ways in which agency is performed and engendered.

1. Agency in Syncretic Spirituality: A Case of Ayo Andere, Priestess of the Ajon'Kpa Cult in North-Eastern Nigeria

Maryam Yusuf Magaji · University of Abuja

This paper examines the complex spiritual agency of Gambo Umaru, Ayo Andere of the Ajon'kpa Cult in North-eastern Nigeria, a woman who embodies religious fluidity by existing simultaneously within Islamic and Traditional spiritual frameworks. In the study, I specifically focus on Andere's syncretic spirituality and the lived expressions in her daily life and in the performance of her spiritual functions in the Jukun Wapan society through the lens of Nancy T. Ammerman's (2021) *Lived Religion*. Also drawing on Elisabet Le Roux's (2019) concept of complicit agency, I investigate Andere's ability to draw on Jukun ancestral memory as a form of strategic negotiation for authority and her attempt at guiding and providing solutions to members of the Jukun society. Ultimately, I argue that Gambo Umaru as Andere, expands and merges the boundaries between two faith systems, demonstrating that African spirituality is not a static one but a living continuum of negotiation, syncretism and renewal. My arguments are based on data collected from archival

materials, responses to a series of unstructured interviews with the priestess and discussions conducted over a period of six months, with two elders in the Wukari Traditional Council, in addition to details from observing Andere personally.

2. Salafi Islamic Education and Muslim Women Agency: A Case of Maahad Girls Training Institute in Nairobi, Kenya

Fatuma Mwatamu · *University of Nairobi, Kenya*

The Maahad Girls' Training Institute (Maahad GTI) plays a pivotal role in promoting Salafi Islamic education among young Muslim women in Nairobi, Kenya. This research explores the foundational Salafi ideological underpinnings that shape the institute's educational framework and critically examines the resultant forms of Muslim women's agency. Utilizing Islamic critical pedagogy and Saba Mahmood's (2005) theory of women-agency, the paper investigates how education within this conservative setting becomes a site for negotiating religious selfhood and practical empowerment. Data were gathered through a purposive sampling approach involving twenty students, educators and administrators at Maahad GTI between 2021 and 2023. The mixed-methods approach included questionnaires for educators and students, semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and textual analysis. Findings reveal that the curriculum's pragmatic Salafi-Shafi'i synthesis provides students with the critical tools of religious literacy, enabling them to move from external conformity to the active cultivation and expression of religious agency. The study demonstrates that empowerment is achieved through ethical self-cultivation—mastering devotional norms—which equips women with the authority to navigate complex questions of piety and social engagement within the Kenyan context, challenging liberal assumptions about resistance as the sole measure of empowerment. The paper concludes that faith-based institutions like Maahad GTI do not simply impose ideology but provide Muslim women with critical tools through religious knowledge and a transformed ethical disposition for personal empowerment and engagement within their social spheres.

3. Competing Allegiances and Marital Contestations: Negotiating Male Agency and Pastoral Authority in Ugandan Neo-Pentecostalism

Alexander Paul Isiko · *Kyambogo University*

This paper analyses contested relations between gender, marriage, and pastoral authority in neo-Pentecostal church spaces in contemporary Uganda. Based on 'popular culture' news and human-interest stories aired on one of Uganda's local televisions, Bukedde Television, analysis is made of ways in which husbands express disagreements about their wives' utmost devotedness to pastors and church spaces, usually seen as substituting husband authority and domestic and marital obligations. Such contested relations breed reactionary responses, through which men reclaim authority, presence, and control within the household. The paper conceives these dynamics as 'competing allegiances' between conjugal loyalty and pastoral devotion, on one hand, and 'marital contestations', where male agency is reimagined to respond to women's flapping religious predispositions. The paper analyses these negotiations within broader discourses of masculinity, patriarchy, and Pentecostal theology, highlighting the localized struggles through which male authority is both destabilized and reconstituted. It is a scholarly contribution to African gender and religion scholarship as it explicates neo-Pentecostal pastoral authority distraction of traditional marital power structures while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal logics in Ugandan society.

4. Exploring Intersex Bodies in Theological Discourses: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Testimonies

Josephine Kanyiva Moses · *St Paul's University*

The 2025 declaration by U.S. President Donald Trump, recognizing only male and female categories, marks a significant moment in the visibility of intersex individuals who often find their unique biological realities overshadowed within LGBTQI+ frameworks. This contrasts with progressive steps like Kenya's inclusion of intersex people in the national census. In response, intersex communities are forming independent organizations, prompting a discussion that religious thought can no longer ignore. This study conducts a qualitative analysis of online testimonies by intersex individuals in Kenya, guided by decolonial feminist theology as its theoretical framework to challenge binary epistemologies and centre embodied knowledge as a site of theological reflection. Two guiding questions shape the investigation: What wisdom can we gain by listening to historically silenced intersex voices in theology and how can scriptural texts and theology be reinterpreted with intersex embodiment as the starting point.? Spiritual agency is employed as a critical lens through which intersex individuals articulate their theological belonging, challenge

exclusionary narratives, and reimagine their place within faith communities. Through this lens, dominant theological frameworks that have historically marginalized non-normative bodies are interrogated. Ultimately the paper proposes a transformative praxis that affirms intersex embodiment as sacred, epistemically rich, and theologically generative.

Classroom 18 Embodied and Gendered Agency in Indigenous Religions

Chair: Mary Kihuha, Pan-African Christian University

Panel abstract

The papers in this panel engage the rich and complex ways in which embodied and gendered agency is constructed and enacted in the context of Africa's diverse indigenous religious traditions. Doing so, they interrogate and complicate any caricatures of indigenous religions as "traditional", "conservative" or "static", instead demonstrating processes of transformation, adjustment and evolution within these traditions.

1. The Colour of Mediumship: Performing Self, Holiness, and Beauty in Ga Kple Religion

Philip Kwame Boafo · Library of Africa and The African Diaspora

This paper examines the intersection of beauty, holiness, and mediumship in the Ga Kple religion of Accra, Ghana. It focuses on the gendered and socio-spiritual agency of woyei (female spirit mediums). The paper explores how woyei perform the self and construct bodily aesthetics in response to spiritual expectations and colonial-capitalist beauty ideals that shape womanhood and visibility. Paying attention to the practice of skin bleaching among spirit mediums, the paper investigates how notions of holiness are being reconfigured through gendered practices of beautification and self-styling. The paper argues that skin functions as a ritual surface through which woyei enact both devotion and dissent, mediating the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. By theorising mediumship as a gendered site of embodied agency, the study shows how theological aesthetics and social aspiration converge in the lived experiences of these women. I draw on walking ethnography, interviews, participant observation, and archival research, to show how woyei negotiate spiritual authority and moral scrutiny within a landscape of commodified beauty. Ultimately, the paper contributes to broader debates on African religions, gender, and embodiment by revealing how the female body becomes a locus of both spiritual vocation and social negotiation. It situates Ga mediumship as a powerful space where holiness, beauty, and gendered agency are continuously performed, contested, and reimaged.

2. Gender and Sexual Agency through Embodied Performance of the Ifá Sacred Narratives

Ibukunolu Isaac Olodude · Obafemi Awolowo University

This paper examines gender and sexuality among the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria through the agency of embodied performance of the sacred texts of Ifá. While Ifá has often been approached as an archive of sacred texts of the Yoruba indigenous religion, this study reframes it as a living oral art in which meaning is continually enacted through voice, gesture, rhythm, and audience interaction. Through contextual analysis of Ifá texts and its performatives by Ifá priests, called Babaláwo, it explores what Ifá says about fertility, gender binaries, same-sex intimacy, and sexual desire. Data was obtained from four verses—Ògúndá Méjì, Òyèkú Méjì, Ìwòrì Méjì, and Òṣé Méjì which comes out in oral forms of performance poetry performed by Ifá priests. The Ifá priests are the custodians of Yoruba traditions and indigenous religion. The study is also based on an in-depth interview conducted with three (3) Ifá priests aimed at understanding the interpretations of the Ifá texts on fertility, gender duality, same-sex intimacy, and sexual desire. It adopts Schechner's Performance theory to examine the language use and structural patterns of Ifá poetic verses as performed by the Ifá priests to gain a deeper understanding of how performance serve as agency in conveying cultural understandings of fertility, gender duality, same-sex intimacy, and sexual desire. The study highlights how Ifá priests manipulate tonal nuances, bodily gestures, voice alternation and rhythmic drumming to dramatize gender and sexual dynamics, while audiences co-produce meaning through laughter and collective murmurs of assent.

3. Love, Power, and Spirit: Young Zulu Women's Use of African Indigenous Love-enhancing Artefacts in Negotiating Intimacy and Agency

Thobeka Khubisa · University of KwaZulu-Natal

The use of African indigenous love-enhancing artefacts to attract, retain, and sustain intimate relationships has long been an 'open secret' within African contexts, yet remains under-researched, especially in relation to its ritual and

spiritual dimensions. This paper explores how young Zulu women in South Africa invoke spiritual forces—uNkulunkulu (God, the Creator) and Abantu Abadala (the ancestors)—to activate the power of these artefacts in pursuit of committed partnerships. Through practices such as ukuthandaza (prayer), ukuphahla (ancestral communication), and ukukhuluma (invocations), women seek to influence relationship outcomes, reflecting both personal agency and societal expectations. Drawing on interviews, the paper highlights how these practices enable women to navigate power and control within intimate relationships. Located within a postcolonial indigenous paradigm and framed within postcolonial feminist theory, this work positions indigenous artefacts as active expressions of women's religious literacy and spiritual agency in shaping love and intimacy.

4. Traditional Herbs and Metaphysical Beliefs: An Analysis of Gender Perceptions in the Bamenda Grassfields

Banla Noela Kinyuy · *University of Bamenda*

Traditional herbs have long been associated with healing and spiritual practices in various cultures around the world, often intertwined with metaphysical beliefs. It is against this background that this paper explores the relationship between traditional herds and metaphysical beliefs, specifically focusing on gender perceptions. The study investigates how gender perceptions influence the harvest, use and interpretation of traditional herbs in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. By examining the role of gender in the cultivation, harvesting, preparation and consumption of traditional herbs, the paper provides insights into how metaphysical beliefs shape gender perception in traditional healing practices. The research based on ethnographic analytical research relies of primary (mainly oral interviews/ participant observation) and secondary sources. The findings reveal that spiritual believes serve as a determinant in the harvesting, preparation and consumption of certain herbs. It also reveals certain traditional herbs with gender disparity in relation to who harvest, when to harvested and who consumes. For instance, women are sometimes prohibited from harvesting some herd during their menstrual cycle with the belief that "the plant will die". This research is therefore pertinent as it addresses an important aspect of women agency in traditional medical practices.

Session V · Thursday 30 July · 10:45–12:15

Meeting Room 03 Spirituality, Agency and Public Life

Chair: Joseph Chita, University of Zambia

1. Spirituality and Agency in Tertiary Education: Insights from a Survey at the University of Botswana

Philipp Öhlmann · *University of Botswana/ Martin Luther University*

There is a vast body of literature on the role of religion in education globally, indicating that religion and spirituality contribute substantially to students' agency and educational outcomes at the tertiary level. However, far less research has examined spirituality as a factor shaping the agency of tertiary students in the Southern African context, and particularly in Botswana. This gap is all the more striking given the high relevance of religion and spirituality in Southern African societies. This paper therefore seeks to explore the role of religion and spirituality in higher education in Botswana. Specifically, it investigates the ways in which spirituality and religion shape the experiences of students at the University of Botswana. It assesses the extent to which spirituality and religion enhance tertiary students' agency in their educational trajectories and thus constitute a resource for their academic progress. At the same time, the paper examines the ways in which religion may also constrain students' agency and thereby hinder their educational advancement. The analysis is based on rich quantitative data from the Religion on Campus Survey, conducted over several semesters with students enrolled in the General Education Curriculum course Religion and Development at the University of Botswana.

2. Economic Inequality and the Spiritual Regulation of Responsibility in African Religions

Learnmore Godfrey Chirunga · *Kgolagano College*

This paper examines the relationship between spirituality, gender, and economic inequality in African religious contexts by engaging critical debates in religion and development studies. While religion is frequently framed within development discourse as a resource for empowerment, resilience, and social support, less attention has been paid to

how religious practices restructure economic inequality through the moral allocation of responsibility. Approaching spirituality as a lived and embodied practice rather than belief alone, the paper analyses how religious discourses translate structural economic failure into personal and household obligation, with disproportionate consequences for women. Drawing on African feminist and postcolonial scholarship, the paper argues that religious institutions operating within contexts of chronic economic constraint function as sites of moral-economic governance. Through preaching, counselling, ritual practice, and charitable programming, care, endurance, sacrifice, and accountability are spiritualized as virtues, redistributing responsibility downward rather than addressing structural conditions of inequality. Within this moral economy, women's agency becomes central to sustaining households, communities, and faith-based development initiatives. Their labour and resilience are valorized as indicators of empowerment and participation, yet this recognition rarely results in material redistribution, economic power, or institutional authority. Agency thus emerges as productive for development outcomes while remaining costly for those who bear its burdens. The paper contends that this spiritual regulation of responsibility constitutes a strategic, though often unacknowledged, dimension of religion's role in development. Responsibility is imposed not through coercion but through virtue, discipline, and spiritual legitimacy. By foregrounding responsibility as a neglected analytic category, the paper complicates dominant narratives of faith-based development, empowerment, and resilience, and contributes to critical discussions on how religion mediates gendered economic inequality in African development contexts.

3. What Drives Christian Extremism in Eastern Africa? Case Study of Religious Cults in Kenya and Uganda

John Mwangi · *National Intelligence and Research University*

This study, relying on two case studies in East Africa, responds to the following question: What drives Christian extremism with a focus on Kenya and Uganda. The study focuses on two incidents of religious extremism, with a focus on the Kanungu Incident in Uganda in the year 2000 where over 1,000 members of this religious cult perished in a fire incident. The second case for comparison is the Shakahola massacre in Kilifi County of Kenya, where over 400 adherents of a local sect perished in the year 2023. These two case studies help to illuminate not only the drivers of Christian extremism but also nuance the process and motivations driving this phenomenon. The study, therefore, contributes to nuancing debates around the drivers of Christian extremism and the implications they bring in contemporary societies. The study insights depart from the well established studies that have tended to focus a lot more on Islamist-inspired forms of violent extremism, to the neglect of the evolving phenomenon of Christian extremism. This study draws on content analysis of documents, newspapers, and expert interviews to understand the enabling factors that drive individuals to religious cults and the implications this has on their spirituality. The findings of the study shall be useful to situate contextual factors around Christian extremism and situate these debates out of the current study context.

4. Digital Subaltern Spirituality: Mediated Charisma and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority in African Online Religion

Denzil Chetty · *University of South Africa*

Over the past decade, we have witnessed digital platforms transform the African religious landscape by creating spaces where subaltern spiritual actors, i.e., women leaders, grassroots prophets, and informal ministers, exercise agency and claim authority outside institutional hierarchies. Drawing on subaltern theory and digital religion scholarship, this paper introduces the concept of "digital subaltern spirituality" to examine how marginalised actors negotiate power online. Through livestreamed worship, social media sermons, WhatsApp prayer networks, and TikTok prophetic messages, these actors cultivate spiritual communities and exercise influence that challenges traditional religious authority. Digital mediation enables new forms of charisma, visibility, and leadership, particularly for African actors historically excluded from formal ecclesiastical structures. Drawing on selective case studies, I argue that digital platforms function as infrastructural sites of subaltern religious expression, where spirituality becomes both a practice of empowerment and a mechanism for renegotiating gendered and institutional hierarchies. By theorising digital subaltern spirituality, this paper offers a new analytical framework for understanding the intersection of marginality, agency, and technology in African religious life, and provides insights into how spirituality, gender, and digital mediation co-construct authority in contemporary Africa.

Chair: Itohan Idumwonyi, Gonzaga University

1. The Kipsigis Traditional Religious Conceptualization of Spirituality

Christine Chemutai Chirchir · *Kenya Highlands University*

For the Kipsigis, Spirituality means a sense of connection to something bigger than self. This involves a search for meaning and purpose for life. Before the coming of Christianity to Africa, the Africans had their own religious thought systems. Their view of reality provided a natural background for living. Mbiti in his book 'African religions and philosophy' says, "Africans are notoriously religious. And each people group have its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices." When the missionaries introduced Christianity to Africa, that system was tempered with and to some extent, it was relegated to the background. This paper examined the Kipsigis traditional religious conceptualization of spirituality, looking particularly at their religious thought forms. To do that, the researcher focused on three elements that are fundamental to Kipsigis. These are, the belief in a supreme being, nature and the ancestors. The study examined the place of the supreme being in Kipsigis traditional religious conceptualization of spirituality, how nature is a factor and how the ancestors contributed to the Kipsigis Traditional religious conceptualization of spirituality. The three main research questions provided an important analytical framework for studying the data collected. The research focused its scope to the Kipsigis community of Kenya, East Africa. This research used inter-disciplinary methods which involved the use of interviews, questionnaires and secondary sources. The data collected was analyzed using qualitative method and the findings will be shared with the relevant bodies for use in understanding the African traditional religious conceptualization of spirituality. The findings add to the pool of knowledge in the study of African traditional religious conceptualization of spirituality.

2. "Doing prophet" in Kenya - Ethnographic and Praxeological Perspectives on Materiality and Agency

Theresa Mayer · *University of Tübingen*

In recent years, so-called prophetic churches have gained striking visibility and influence within African Christianity, also within the Kenyan Pentecostal landscape. Prophets and prophetesses often claim privileged access to the spiritual realm and a direct and immediate connection to God. Their widespread use and, in some cases, the commercialization of anointed objects has often led to accusations of abuse and financial fraud. However, little attention has been paid to the agency of objects in their dimensions as constituting elements of spiritual power. Drawing on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in three different churches in Nairobi, this doctoral dissertation adopts a praxeological approach to examine how being a prophet is actively enacted rather than simply attributed. The analysis explores how "doing prophet" emerges through legitimization strategies, performative acts, interactions with church goers, as well as through the agency of objects and other material elements. Highlighting the materiality of religion, the dissertation focuses on the significance of bodily techniques, emotions, spatial practices, and objects as constitutive parts of the doing prophet. In this presentation, particular attention is given to so-called prophetic tools such as Anointing Water and Oil or specific textiles, which facilitate an intensified, extra-everyday, and eschatological experientiality for church members. It's therefore argued that these dimensions of materiality do not merely enhance spiritual empowerment but also co-create prophetic authority. By conceptualizing doing prophet as a practical enactment constituted through material, performative and discursive practices, this dissertation contributes to debates on material religion, the agency of materiality and embodied forms of spiritual power and shapes the discussions on a highly contemporary and contested phenomenon within Kenyan Pentecostalism.

3. Rūraacio and Spirituality: Embodied Tradition, Social Agency, and Identity among the Agikūyū of Kenya

Miriam Njoroge · *University of Nairobi*

This paper examines rūraacio, the traditional Agikūyū marriage ceremony involving bride wealth negotiations, as a vital expression of African spirituality that transcends institutional religion. Grounded in Agikūyū worldviews and John Mbiti's (1960) insight that "wherever the African is, there is his religion," the study situates rūraacio as a lived, embodied, and communal spirituality that weaves together sacredness, kinship, and identity. Ethnographic research and participant observation reveal that rūraacio affirms interconnectedness with family, community, and ancestors while functioning as a framework for reconciliation, respect, and collective wellbeing. It empowers participants—particularly women and families—by affirming belonging and social agency, even as its gendered dimensions expose

persistent patriarchal authority. Thus, rūraacio demonstrates how spirituality in African contexts is diffuse, dynamic, and fluid, blurring boundaries between indigenous religions and Christianity. Key findings highlight how rūraacio strengthens kinship bonds and provides spaces for negotiating gender roles and community power. Policy recommendations include safeguarding rūraacio as intangible heritage, fostering interfaith dialogue, and supporting women's agency in ritual and ceremonial decision-making. The paper concludes that rūraacio illustrates how African spirituality enables various people and groups to assert identity and agency while shaping broader religious, social, political, and economic life in Kenya and the diaspora.

4. Political Spiritualities and Prophecy within the Tokoist Church in Post--Civil War Angola

Frederico Carducci · *University of Geneva*

This paper, based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Angola, aims to analyze the relationship between the followers of the Tokoist Church and peace in post-civil war Angola (since 2002). Founded during the colonial period under the leadership of Simão Toko and characterized by a pacifist stance toward the war of independence (1961–1975), the Tokoist Church was renewed in 2002 under new leadership—Afonso Nunes—who claims to be the reincarnation or personification of the founding prophet and to carry out a mission of both civil and spiritual peace, meant to fulfill his prophecy. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of political spirituality (Foucault 1994), this study examines how the religious practices of young followers—such as prayer, their self-conducts based on respect for authority, and their rejection of any form of militant engagement—as well as their relationship to Simão Toko's prophecy of peace and to the revelation of the Holy Spirit, redefine their role in society and their relationship with the state. In this sense, these practices reflect a process of religious and civic subjectivation through which believers acquire the moral and social resources necessary to access citizenship (Marshall 2009; Bompani & Valois 2018). By emphasizing the entanglement of the prophet's and the prophecy's distinct temporalities, this work seeks to reveal the interconnections between religion and politics, taking religion seriously as a site of individual, social, and political transformation.

Classroom 17 Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Encounter

Chair: Faithful Oluokun, University of Bayreuth

1. Idolatry or Inculturation? Christian Participation in Akan Libation Rituals

Robert Owusu Agyarko · *Central University*

This theological exploration examines the complex relationship between religion, spirituality and community. One of the major Akan rituals is libation, as a result of which families, stools and communities identify with Onyame, the abosom and the nsamamfo. Libation in Ghana is part of lived and embodied spirituality that rationalises social belonging. The Akan setting, unlike most of the representations of African ritual authority as male-dominated, allows women to pour libation and may themselves become ancestors, so libation can be a location in which spirituality and gendered agency meet. Nevertheless, the missionaries of the Europeans who worked in West Africa denounced this practice in that region as idolatrous. In the wake of the phenomenon of African theology, a number of theologians have made contributions to systematic discourse of such libation practices. This paper critically contrasts four prominent Akan Ghanaian theologians on whether, and in what ways, Christian involvement in libation rituals can be considered as being consistent with Christian faith. They differ on more fundamental cultural-theological assumptions: the manner in which they both approach mediation of the ancestors and divinities, and the distinction between veneration and worship. The crucial question then is: what are their assumptions regarding spiritual presence, authority and communion in their various assessments of libations? The paper presents the explicit approach of each theologian to libation alongside a thematic approach to the overall structures of God-talk, the unique mediation of Christ, and inculturation. The paper helps understand the reason why the same practice is being labelled as an idolatrous compromise or as a contextual Christian practice, as well as the implications of gendered ritual competence in Akan Christianity.

2. Tracing Orisa West African Roots and Atlantic Legacies: Some Marginal Notes concerning Cosmology, Syncretism and Gender

Imeje Fidelis · *Keele University*

This working paper examines some conceptual, theoretical, and methodological gaps that continue to shape the study of Òrìṣà religious traditions and practices in south-west Nigeria and Trinidad. It reviews key scholarly literature and engages debates organised around three interrelated thematic axes: cosmology, syncretism, and gender. It also considers parallel studies which, although not fitting neatly into these categories, illuminate the broader political, archival, and transnational conditions that have influenced the documentation, suppression, and resurgence of Òrìṣà traditions. The paper argues that persistent methodological limitations in the interpretation of sources, including texts, observations, and material artefacts, have contributed to conflicting readings of Òrìṣà cosmology; complicated theoretical debates on the usefulness of syncretism as an analytical framework; and reinforced reductive, binary understandings of gender that exclude LGBTQ and other non-normative practitioners whose experiences and contributions remain central to Òrìṣà communities. These gaps distort or obscure understandings of the genealogical dynamics of Òrìṣà communities and the ways they have negotiated structural persecution to sustain their identities and ritual practices over time. As part of its broader objectives, the paper seeks to answer the question: What are the existing gaps in the study of Òrìṣà religious traditions, and why does identifying and addressing these gaps matter? Employing a postcolonial analytical framework, it reviews foundational and contemporary literature by both Indigenous and Western scholars in History, Religious Studies, and the Anthropology of Religion. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a guide and encourage scholars of Yoruba religious studies and Afro-Atlantic religions to develop innovative and creative approaches for addressing the identified gaps.

3. A Theological Exploration of African Traditional Conceptions of Spirituality in Buganda Culture: Engaging in Dialogue with the Anglican Church of Uganda

Richard Mulindwa · *Uganda Christian University*

Mbiti asserts that Africans are notoriously religious. In this article, I write to explore the African Traditional Religious understanding of spirituality within Buganda culture, engaging with it theologically in dialogue with the Church of Uganda, in which I am an ordained priest. Buganda spirituality is deeply relational, grounded in belief in Katonda (the Supreme Being), reverence for ancestors, and recognition of spiritual forces that shape moral, social, and ecological life. As John S. Mbiti (1969) observes, African spirituality is inseparable from daily existence. This perspective resonates strongly with Ganda cosmology, where the sacred permeates kinship, land, trade, kingship (Obwakabaka), and communal ethics. Employing a contextual and inculturation theology framework (Shorter, 1988), In this paper, I explore areas of convergence and tension between Ganda traditional spirituality and Anglican Christian theology. Practices such as ancestor remembrance "okwabya olumbe" and spirit mediation — historically challenged by Anglican missionary theology—are re-examined in light of Christian doctrines of communion, mediation, and stewardship. Drawing on Kwame Bediako's (1995) assertion that African Christianity must engage indigenous religious heritage as a theological resource, the study argues that ancestral consciousness in Buganda can be critically correlated with the Anglican understanding of the communion of saints without compromising Christological confession. Methodologically, the paper draws on oral traditions, Buganda cosmology, Anglican liturgical practices on culture, evangelism, and pastoral care. These ecclesial texts demonstrate an evolving Anglican openness toward cultural engagement while maintaining doctrinal integrity. The study further addresses challenges of dual religious belonging and syncretism within Buganda Anglican communities, calling for pastoral discernment rather than outright rejection. The paper concludes that a contextual Anglican theology attentive to Buganda spirituality enriches Christian faith and practice. Such an approach enhances ecclesial relevance, strengthens discipleship, and affirms African cultural identity as a legitimate locus for theological reflection within the Anglican Church of Uganda.

4. Yoruba Spirituality in a Christianized Society: Reinterpreting Hell Today

Seyifunmi Damilola Bademosi*, **Oghenekevwe Kate Jibromah*** & **Ajani Tunde Olanrewaju** · *Adeyemi Federal University of Education*

It is no longer news that Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria have a rich spiritual tradition grounded in cosmology, ancestral veneration, and moral philosophy, which emphasized on the continuity between the physical and spiritual realms. From history, Yoruba eschatology did not prioritize a concept of eternal punishment comparable to Christian doctrine of Hell; rather, it articulated various realms of existence, reincarnation, and ancestral agency. But in contrast, Christian doctrine of Hell as a place for eternal damnation and punishment for the wicked was introduced alongside proselytizing efforts during colonial and post-colonial eras. This article therefore with the use of contextual and descriptive methods analyses how these two worldview system interact, conflict and synthesize within the

contemporary religious lives of Yoruba people. It also explores how traditional Yoruba conceptions of afterlife and spiritual consequence are reinterpreted within contemporary Christianized Yoruba contexts, with particular focus on the doctrine of Hell. It then argues that Yoruba spirituality offers distinct frameworks for moral consequence that differ significantly from eternal damnation. The paper highlights ongoing negotiation between Yoruba religious philosophy and Christian theology among Yoruba believers today. The paper concludes that traditional cosmology lacks concept directly equivalent to the Christian Hell, interactions between belief systems have produced contextually nuanced understandings that reflect both heritage and faith. The article recommends continued scholarly engagement across theology, anthropology, and religious studies on how Yoruba spirituality negotiates moral consequence in the modern world.

Classroom 18 Decolonising the Pedagogy of Migration and Religion

Chair: Abel Ugba, University of Leeds

This roundtable interrogates how the religious and spiritual lives of transnational young people of African migrant backgrounds compel a rethinking of dominant pedagogies in the study of migration and religion. Drawing on findings from the ESRC-funded project *The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Transnational Young People of African Migrant Backgrounds*, it examines how youth-centered, transnational and lived-religion perspectives disrupt Eurocentric epistemologies, methodological nationalism, and binary imaginaries that continue to structure higher education curricula. By foregrounding African and diasporic experiences, multidirectional mobilities, and the everyday production of spiritual meaning, the roundtable explores the pedagogical implications of teaching migration and religion through decolonial and Global South frameworks.

Discussants

- Abel Ugba, University of Leeds — Towards a Decolonial Pedagogical Agenda for Migration and Religion Studies
- Dominic Pasura, University of Glasgow — From RASTAY Findings to Migration–Religion Pedagogy
- Dodeye Williams and Ntongha Ikpi, University of Calabar — Teaching Japa: Religious Aspiration, Left-Behind Youth and the Limits of Push–Pull Migration Theory
- Ezra Chitando and Reggemore Marongedze, University of Zimbabwe — Kufambira as Curriculum: African Epistemologies of Mobility and Spirituality
- Bernard Matolino and Primrose Sibusisiwe Mlambo*, University of Pretoria — Teaching Ubuntu After Xenophobia: Postcoloniality, Precarity and the Limits of African Belonging
- Nomatter Sande, Sarah Kazira and Dominic Pasura, University of Glasgow — Teaching Digital Faith: African Youth, Online Religious Belonging and the Reconfiguration of Spiritual Authority

Session VI · Thursday 30 July · 13:15–14:45

Meeting Room 03 Faith, Development and Public Life

Chair: Philipp Öhlmann, University of Botswana

1. On 'Chamballaziina Amanuu, Nima Angels, Yan' Bara, Ankura': Religious Authority, Gender, and the Challenges of Muslim Women's Preaching in Ghana

Abirat Zakariah · University of Ghana

Debates surrounding the interpretation of sacred texts within several religious communities globally take many forms, including a gendered one. Religious authority and gender play significant roles in the interpretation of sacred texts in Ghanaian society. The interplay between traditional beliefs, the influence of Christianity and Islam, and evolving gender dynamics shapes how sacred texts are understood and applied. For over three decades, some Muslim women in Ghana have challenged the status quo of an otherwise exclusive male religious authority in interpretive spaces in contemporary times, shifting the narrative and establishing themselves as authorities of the Islamic sacred texts. Consequently, their actions have received both commendation and condemnation. Their critics accuse them of promoting vocal nudity, describing their voices, which are amplified in public spaces and online, as part of their awrah

(nudity) and therefore must be concealed. This paper, using Islamic feminist theory, thus examined the gendered implications of the interpretation of Islamic sacred texts within Africa. But more specifically, it explored the complexities of interpreting sacred texts in Ghana, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities presented by issues of religious authority and gender in Ghanaian Muslim society. The paper reveals that despite the name-calling and accusations, Ghanaian Muslim women preachers have championed socio-religious courses over three decades, which have contributed to the development of Muslim societies. The paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on women as religious authorities in the African context.

2. Religion, Spirituality, and Development: A Trinitarian Development from Creation, Covenant, and Community in Elisha's Miraculous Oil (2 Kings 4:1-7)

Margaret Salli Effungani · *St Pauls University*

This theological exploration examines the complex relationship between religion, spirituality and community transformation, arguing that sustainable development must be grounded in religious principles. While progress has been made through various initiatives, persistent disparities, social fragmentation, and inequality underscore a crucial need to integrate divine principles into development paradigms. Many contemporary efforts tend to overlook the spiritual and moral dimensions that shape community resilience, values, and collective wellbeing. Drawing upon the biblical narrative of Elisha's miraculous oil (2 Kings 4:1-7), this study employs a Trinitarian framework centred on creation, covenant, and community, through the lens of Christianity. The objectives are to demonstrate how divine creation reveals God's provision for human needs, how a covenantal relationship with a relational God sustains human flourishing, and how authentic community empowers sustainable transformation. Moving beyond a deficit-based mindset, the paper advocates an asset-based perspective, emphasising divine-human interaction as foundational to holistic development. Methodologically, the paper combines biblical exegesis with contemporary development methods, employing Paul Tillich's correlational approach to harmonise sacred texts with real-world practices. It also incorporates insights from liberation theology, underscoring God's care for the oppressed and the epistemic importance of marginalised voices. The miracle of the oil symbolises divine stewardship, spiritual renewal, and communal solidarity, emphasising that genuine progress arises from the interconnectedness of spiritual vitality and communal responsibility. Ultimately, this work demonstrates that biblical theology provides a comprehensive vision for human flourishing, encompassing material, social, and spiritual dimensions. It calls for an integrated paradigm where development is rooted in divine grace and covenantal love, fostering hope, empowerment, and sustainable stewardship within communities. This synthesis invites believers and practitioners alike to reimagine development through a sacred lens of divine justice and mercy.

3. 'Progressive' Pentecostalism, Spirituality and Development in Ghana

Jeffrey Haynes · *London Metropolitan University*

Recent years have seen phenomenal growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana, with a profound impact on socio-economic development. Pentecostalism emphasises personal religious experience and the Holy Spirit's work to encourage individual and social development. Many Pentecostal churches in Ghana are actively involved in development, prioritising spiritual transformation and individual responsibility, while encouraging achievement of social development. Pentecostal churches in Ghana, including the country's largest, the Church of Pentecost, are developing major social and economic programmes, including education, healthcare, and economic empowerment, which they claim significantly contribute to the well-being of church members and of the wider community. Pentecostalism in Ghana aims to promote hard work, entrepreneurship, community support, and personal responsibility, increased economic activity and social upliftment, via church-based/derived education, healthcare, and micro-finance programmes. Critics point to potential for exploitation through the 'prosperity gospel' which prioritises individual material wealth over broader social issues. In Ghana, 'progressive Pentecostalism' refers to strong commitment by some Pentecostal churches to social ministries organised around the congregation/neighbourhood. Progressive Pentecostalism approaches constitute an important strand of development activity which complements efforts of government and other self-help efforts, leading, it is claimed, to enhanced social and sustainable development. The paper assesses this claim, and ascertains whether 'progressive pentecostalism' in Ghana does lead to identifiable and measurable social development for the women, including women and members of non-Pentecostal religions. Overall, the paper is concerned with the human dimensions of development: the beliefs, teachings and

activities of Pentecostal churches in Ghana in relation to human salvation, progress and/or transformation, and the significantly to contribute to sustainable development for the entire community.

4. African Spiritual Economies of Kurombesa and Livelihoods in Zimbabwe

Amos Muyambo* and Muyambo Tennyson · University of Botswana, The National University of Lesotho and Great Zimbabwe University

African cultures have always practised and viewed spirituality as a way of life. Every aspect of an African society is highly spiritual. Traditionally, in Zimbabwe we have seen spirit mediums such as Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi inspiring the Chimurenga war of liberation. This spiritualized lifestyle is clearly evidenced in some of the secretive rituals and ceremonies performed in African communities. When droughts threatened farming in traditional African society rainmaking rituals to enhance productivity were performed. This paper explores the secret practices of kurombesa spiritual economies in the Zimbabwean society. This qualitative research adopted key informant interviews and observation methods to collect data. Using the social capital theory as the study's lens, the study found out that with increased unemployment, droughts, poverty and declining economy in Zimbabwe, spiritual entrepreneurs through the kurombesa ritual have become popular in contemporary Zimbabwean society. Livelihoods such as Makorokoza, small scale gold mining practices and mushikashika vending have become popular economies driven by kurombesa spirituality to maximise rewards. Women traditional healers are at the forefront of the ritual as they possess spiritual power in male-dominated trades or livelihoods. The paper locates itself in the Zimbabwean context, utilising Qualitative methodology and collected data through source analysis and interviews, findings show that African Spirituality plays an important role in livelihoods through such practices of kurombesa. This practice intersect through all religious practices though it changes in nature and forms. The study note the resilience of African practices and beliefs and the embeddness of religion in all aspects of the African people's lives despite modernity.

Classroom 16 Ritual, Memory and the Spiritual Body

Chair: Federico Carducci, University of Geneva

1. Spirituality within Post-colonial Constraints?

Klaus Geiselhart · Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

As colonial administrations have not been able or willing to understand the role of spirituality in African societies they established laws to ban respective practices. Sometimes these rules have been carried on after independence as remnants of the colonial era. One such law is the Betsuanaland Protectorate administration Witchcraft Proclamation of 1927. Healing practices that contained spirituality in some way (such as divining, fortune-telling, or trance dancing) were forbidden and branded as witchcraft. This act has shaped public understandings of traditional healing and was adopted by the Government of Botswana after 1966 so that it is still in legal force up to today. As contemporary elites often are oriented to international standards and some traditional cultural aspects might be considered tabu, it can be assumed that more such phenomena can be found and explored. In a first approximation this paper offers theses about what such settings might imply for contemporary societies eg. on national levels, where contemporary authorities govern on the basis of inconsistent institutional settings, or in local contexts where customary courts are restricted by guidelines that do not fully reflect the complexity of traditional cosmologies. Also the international context of human rights is of interest, according to which local communities should be allowed to "practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies" (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007). How can this be achieved when traditional healing is more or less accepted e.g. by the WHO, yet witchcraft is barely recognised as part of African culture? The presentation will less provide answers but raises questions in order to fuel discussions and establish contacts for possible future research collaborations.

2. Spirituality and Perception of Offence in Internet Advertising: An Analysis of the Reactions of Islamic, Christian and Animist Religious in Angola

Ezequias Stover · CIES-Iscte, Portugal / ESCS-IPL

The aim of this study is to examine the perception of the message of adverts for entertainment products on the internet by Islamic, Christian and Animist religious people in the Angolan context. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted. 21 interviews were conducted with the leaders of the three religions under study and 4 focus

groups with a number of participants varying between 6 and 8 in each group. Four focus group sessions were held, each focussing on a type of entertainment product (musical shows, Halloween parties, Carnival parties and gambling). The discussions were guided by a semi-structured script to explore religious people's perceptions of subliminal messages in adverts. Transcriptions of the focus group discussions, the content observed and the face-to-face interviews with religious leaders were made using qualitative analysis software (such as MAXQDA) to code and categorise the data. The study concluded that the perceptions of advertisements for entertainment products revealed a certain rejection on the part of the interviewees, mainly on the criteria of morality and importance. The use of half-naked women in contexts unconnected to the product was one of the criticisms raised, making this practice an offence against religious values. The implicit and explicit intentions of the advertising message of entertainment products, specifically themed festivals such as Halloween and Carnival, and how they reflect the identity of the event were observed. The analysis highlights that these advertising materials are aimed at specific audiences and use visual and symbolic elements that can be interpreted in different ways depending on who is observing and their degree of spirituality and religiosity. There is criticism of the exclusivity of these adverts, which tend to alienate the more conservative religious public and beyond, by focusing on themes and images that exalt sensuality or immorality, sexuality, appeals to witchcraft and the 'worldly' side of the festivities. The use of symbols such as the jindungo is mentioned as a metaphor for sexuality, reinforcing the provocative nature of these adverts.

3. From Spirits to Genes: In Silico Analysis of Zār Rituals, Stress, and Women's Healing in Sudan

Salma Mahmoud · *University of Botswana*

Zār rituals in Sudan occupy a powerful space where spirituality, gender, and biology intersect. Often misunderstood as spirit exorcism, Zār is instead a ritual system of negotiation that manages chronic distress, mediates social tensions, and provides culturally meaningful healing, particularly for women. This study reimagines Zār through an interdisciplinary framework that bridges anthropology, religious studies, neuroendocrinology, and epigenetics, asking what happens when spirit, stress, and the body are analyzed together. Using an *in silico* approach, the study synthesizes ethnographic accounts of Zār rituals with biomedical research on chronic stress, hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis activation, cortisol regulation, and intergenerational epigenetic effects. Gendered stressors, domestic labor, marital expectations, social constraint, and economic precarity are examined as biologically embedded experiences that shape women's mental and physical health. Zār rituals, characterized by rhythmic music, chanting, dance, trance, and communal storytelling, emerge as embodied practices that facilitate emotional release, autonomic recalibration, and social validation. Preliminary findings suggest that sustained ritual participation may modulate stress responses, reduce anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms, and strengthen social bonding processes consistent with downregulation of the HPA axis and buffering of stress-related biological effects. Women's central ritual authority highlights Zār as a gendered space of agency, where grievances can be externalized and negotiated within both social and spiritual worlds. By linking African ritual practice to contemporary biological models of stress and epigenetic plasticity, this study demonstrates how Zār functions as a culturally embedded strategy for resilience, healing, and potential intergenerational stress mitigation.

4. Psycho-Theological Discussion on Traditional Taboo that Forbids Women and Children to Attend a Funeral- A South African Pastoral Study

Elijah Baloyi · *University of South Africa*

Almost in every culture in the world, burials and mourning are regulated within the frameworks of the traditions of such a tribe or people. Amongst some South African tribes for the longest time African burial traditions have been under the surveillance of both culture and religion. The tradition of barring women, especially pregnant women and children from funerals amongst the Tsonga speaking people of Limpopo is a currently debatable issue. The main question would be whether this kind of ruling was either beneficial or discriminatory to women and children. The intention of this article is not only to find out the crestedness of the claim, but also to seek reasons as well as the benefit of such decisions. The effects of such a decision on women and children will also be discussed. The paper will further seek theological guidance as a way forward, especially within the democratically changing South Africa.

Chair: Joel Mokhoathi, University of South Africa

1. Promoting Relational Women Agency: A Botho Reflection

Abel Tabalaka · *University of Botswana*

Freedom within Boundaries? Both conceptually and pragmatically, agency often seems to presuppose the importance of others in the community, this including those who may have denied or limited the agency in the first place. Rather than operating in a vacuum, agency presents itself as a socially situated reality, operating within the cultures, religions and other social realities in a given community. To display itself, agentic actions require social interactions as a matter of necessity. This therefore may mean that it is desirable that agency should be perceived as, and be driven towards community enhancing rather than being socially antagonizing. While agentic actions may antagonize certain stereotypes within the society, a nuanced understanding of agency will reveal that, in principle, this 'antagonism' is geared towards a better society. This is a conceptual paper that seeks to critically reflect on the Tswana philosophy of Botho, a concept which centres on the promotion of communality. The paper investigates ways in which a Botho-based agency may or may not be desirable in promoting a relational agency, an agency which locates women's agency within the society. It is envisaged that this paper will provide a localized religio-cultural contribution to the current debate on ways in which agency may be excised within the increasingly complex global world. It is anticipated to speak to a growing academic concern on whether women can truly excise their freedom of choice within the limiting patriarchal systems.

2. Existential Uncertainty and the Expansion of Healing Religions: Women's Spiritual Agency in Luanda's Urban Margins

Claudio Tomas · *Agostinho Neto University*

This paper presents preliminary findings from an exploratory study on female religious leadership and examines the social context that has fostered the emergence and rapid popularization of healing religions in the city of Luanda, Angola. The study focuses on the activities carried out by two churches located on the urban periphery: the Missão Evangélica do Espírito Santo em Angola, popularly known as the "Missão das Santas," led by Mamã Verónica, and the Igreja Pentecostal de Fé e Libertação, led by Apostle Ernestina Matias, affectionately known as "Mamã Tina." The central hypothesis argues that the deinstitutionalization and informalization of social production relations, combined with deep economic inequalities, have contributed to making visible multiple forms of social maladjustment and existential uncertainty, often associated with the inability of state institutions to respond to individual and collective expectations. In this context, everyday action is frequently mediated by religious paradigms centred on threat, danger, and the constant struggle against spiritual evils and invisible forces. The appropriation of Pentecostal and Adventist religious imaginaries emerges as both a symbolic and practical resource of protection in the face of generalized insecurity and afflictions affecting body and spirit. It is precisely at the intersection between religious spiritual praxis and these Pentecostal and Adventist imaginaries that survival strategies are shaped in cities such as Luanda. The practical expression of this reality is seen in the proliferation of women-led religious centres exclusively dedicated to the healing of spiritual and physical afflictions. The agency of these women lies in the maximization of skills such as intercession, prophecy, deliverance, and healing, as well as in the reinterpretation of past experiences and dreams, granting them meaningful existence in the establishment of new relationships with the material world.

3. Beyond Fragmentation: Feminine Generativity and Spiritual Agency in Africa

Assita Kone · *Birkbeck University of London*

Understanding African conceptions of spirituality requires embracing the idea of a generative communion of female and male polarities and transcending the separation between spirituality, scientific knowledge, and political authority. In Africa, the segmentation of these domains is not inherent but has been artificially imposed through colonial epistemic frameworks. As a result, contemporary scholarship often approaches African spiritual traditions through fragmented lenses, obscuring both their integrated logic and the centrality of women's creative agency. From this perspective, the paper draws on African ontologies of creation to emphasise the role of women as spiritual, scientific, and moral-political agents in the materialisation of the African Renaissance. The analysis is grounded on Edgar Morin's theory of complexity and on the Akan principle of Sankofa, understood as a methodological return to ancestral sources

as a condition for transformative futures. Together, these frameworks articulate an epistemic corpus in which African cosmogonies emerge as relational and non-fragmented systems of knowledge. In particular, the paper re-centres women's sacred authority by reconstructing a genealogy of feminine power across African civilisations: from the Ajé divinatory initiatic sisterhood, complemented by the Ifá brotherhood in the Benin–Togo region; to the scientific knowledge embodied by Seshat and her male counterpart Thoth in ancient Egypt; and to the queen mother–chief governance systems of Asante societies in Ghana, exemplified by Yaa Asantewaa. These configurations elucidate an African gnoseology in which spirituality, scientific knowledge, and political order operate as mutually constitutive ontologies, grounded in the necessary association of feminine and masculine principles for the perpetuation of cosmic harmony, Ma'at. On this basis, African Renaissance is conceived not as a symbolic revival, but as a concrete process of societal reorganisation. Under joint feminine and masculine rulership, spirituality functions as a practical capacity to transform social tensions into social cohesion; scientific knowledge is mobilized as an ethically grounded exercise of human intelligence aimed at sustaining natural and social rhythms; and political authority derives its legitimacy from this spiritual and epistemic grounding, translating shared values into norms that regulate collective life. Ultimately, the paper argues that African spirituality is generative rather than contemplative, and that epistemic decolonisation cannot be engineered as an abstract intellectual project. Rather, it must be spiritually gestated in the womb, understood as a primordial quantum field in which Africa's (re)naissance is first conceived, before being articulated through scientific rationality and embodied in political order.

4. Vengeance as Justice: Ngozi (Avenging spirit), Gendered Agency and Women's Inheritance Rights in Contemporary Zimbabwe

Molly Manyonganise · *Zimbabwe Open University*

Discourses on women's inheritance rights are topical in contemporary Zimbabwe specifically among the Shona people. The genealogy of women's inheritance rights shows that they always occupied a dangerous place between customary law and conventional justice systems. A critical analysis of traditional societies shows that they were largely patriarchal and more often marginalized women. However, the fear of a wronged dead woman's spirit coming back to demand justice through causing pain in her husband's lineage provided women with a strong form of agency anchored on religiocultural beliefs. The concept of ngozi (avenging spirit) which is a belief that a wronged dead person's spirit returns to force the perpetrator of an injustice to pay restitution is located in the Shona's metaphysical world. This paper, therefore, explores the metaphysical phenomenon as a powerful, though unusual mechanism of female agency. The intention of the paper is on investigating the gendered nature of this agency, interrogating whether the dependence on spiritual fear empowers women or reveals the failures of modern statutory protections. Through an analysis of the intersections of spirituality, gender and economic independence, the paper argues that the belief in ngozi institutes a jurisprudence of fear that successfully safeguards material possessions for women. Framing vengeance as justice is crucial as it enables the paper to show how ngozi acts as an arbiter, albeit, posthumously, thereby providing checks and balance against property dispossession of women, in this case, promoting gender justice. The paper is largely qualitative and makes use of discourse as presented in online media and interviews to understand the ngozi phenomenon as agency and deploys the socio-spiritual theoretical framework to underpin the study. Secondary sources will be used to support primary data.

Classroom 18 Peacebuilding, Conflict and Grief

Chair: Alexander Paul Isiko, Kyambogo University

1. Peacebuilding Initiatives of Women in Religious and Chieftaincy Institutions in Ghana

Joseph Kwadwo Asuming · *University of Ghana*

Religious and traditional institutions in Ghana have long been central to peacebuilding, yet the gendered dimensions of these efforts remain underexplored. While women play a pivotal role in interreligious dialogue and grassroots conflict resolution, their contributions are often overlooked within the broader framework of grassroots peacebuilding. This paper explores the intersection of spirituality, gender, and agency in Ghana's peacebuilding landscape, focusing on the roles of women in religious and chieftaincy institutions. Drawing on qualitative interviews with female religious leaders, queen mothers, and community mediators, the study examines how women navigate and redefine their

agency within male dominated peace processes. It investigates the lived experiences of women in religious and traditional leadership, shedding light on their localized peace initiatives and the socio-political structures that shape their roles in conflict resolution and community cohesion. Findings reveal that while women's initiatives are instrumental in community-based peace efforts, institutional barriers—rooted in patriarchal norms—continue to limit their influence in national peacebuilding discourse. By highlighting the strategies and resilience of women in navigating these spaces, this study contributes to broader conversations on the role of spirituality and gender in fostering peace, social cohesion, and conflict transformation across Africa. It argues that achieving sustainable peace in Ghana requires a fundamental rethinking of leadership structures to fully integrate women's expertise and agency.

2. Sufism and Resistance: The Spiritual Dimension of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir's Struggle Against the French Occupation of Algeria

Itzhak Weismann · University of Haifa

Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri is best known for his leading role in the resistance movement to the French occupation of Algeria (1830-1847). A native of Qaytana in the western part of the country, he received at the age of 25 the pledge of allegiance from the major tribes of the region under a large elm tree, a reenactment of the Companions' pledge to Prophet Muhammad in Hudaibiya prior to the conquest of Mecca. For fifteen years, he led the struggle against the invaders from the state he established in the interior of the country until forced to surrender to their superior forces. 'Abd al-Qadir's external jihad was accompanied by an urge to an inner spiritual religious reform. He believed that victory passes through a moral regeneration by returning to word of the Qur'an and the exemplary model of the ancestors. Strictly implementing the precepts of the Sharia in his state, he enforced attendance in the mosques and modest attire for women, and prohibited drinking, gambling and smoking. He himself dedicated much of his time to meditation and practiced a weekly fast and night vigils. My proposed paper explores the intersection between 'Abd al-Qadir's spirituality and his conduct of the jihad. I will first detect his Sufi background as son of the major shaykh of the Qadiriyya brotherhood in western Algeria and a follower of the Naqshbandiyya, the most active brotherhood in the Ottoman Empire, then ruling North Africa. Next, I will record the testimonies of his lieutenants and visitors of his spiritual practices and conversations, and then examine their impact on his actual decision-making during the struggle against the French.

3. Of Oil and Hell: Ethnopoetic Testimonies of Grief in the Niger Delta

Emmanuel Edafe Erhijodo · University of Leeds

More than two decades after the oil pipeline explosion that killed over a thousand people in Jesse, Niger Delta, the fire may have been extinguished, but the grief rages on. The permanent bodily disfigurements, mental wounds and ecospiritual trauma caused by the inferno continue to torment survivors and bereaved families. Some studies have explored the socioeconomic effect of the Jesse Pipeline Disaster, others have examined its ecological impact on the ecosystem. However, little attention has been given to the spiritual trauma caused by the inferno. This paper, therefore, focuses on the ecospiritual trauma of survivors and members of bereaved families who not only suffer environmental degradation but also bodily injuries and the loss of loved ones as a result of the firestorm. As its methodology, the paper adopts a mixed-method approach, which includes literary (poetic) analysis and ethnographic data interpretation. It also deploys mediation and reader response as its theoretical framework. This is done in an attempt to democratise poetry and bring it into close conversation with community voices, thereby enhancing our understanding of the ecospiritual trauma suffered by the survivors of the Jesse Pipeline Disaster. Three poems, Pipe Explosion I, II and III, from Karo Okokoh's collection, Manna for the Mind (2012), are purposively selected for the study. The poems which explore the before and aftermath of the explosion serve as a navigation compass to start the conversation with participants about the ecospiritual trauma of the incident. Verses from the poems are deployed as close references in interrogating the ethnographic accounts of survivors from focus group discussions and individual interviews.

4. Cultural violence and non-violence in post-apartheid and post-TRC South Africa: perspectives from South African Women's Theology

Maria Ericson · Dalarna University

This paper explores gender relations from the perspective of a number of South African women theologians. While their experiences of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa differ, their experiences of patriarchy and violence

against women might serve as sources for common ground across "racial" divides. By seeking to reinterpret their respective cultural and religious traditions in emancipatory ways, they provide what can be termed perspectival diversity and cultural non-violence. The ambivalent role of Christian traditions is particularly highlighted, as they identify both beliefs that increase the risk of violence and discrimination against women and beliefs that provide solace, strength and inspiration to resist oppression. A crucial issue is the meaning of forgiveness, reconciliation, self-sacrifice and servanthood in the context of violence and unequal power relations. Another crucial issue is that of partnership and spiritual leadership. Alternative interpretations of Christianity take place in a context where indigenous African cultural and religious traditions are important, also for women active in Christian churches. Such cultural and religious traditions might influence how Christianity is interpreted, and the ambivalent role of some African beliefs is also alluded to. Examples of indigenous African women leaders are also brought up. The empirical examples come both from my interviews with women in South African churches during a previous postdoctoral research project and from further literature studies.

Session VII · Thursday 30 July · 15:15–16:45

Meeting Room 03 Spiritual Abuse and Gendered Harm

Chair: King'asia Mamati, Goethe University

1. 'I need to get inside you for you to be healed.' Proliferation of Sexual Penetration as a Healing Conduit for Women and Girls in Zimbabwe's Churches

Simbarashe Munamati · *Reformed Church in Zimbabwe*

Sexual exploitation of women in the name of healing is on the rise on the African continent and specifically in Zimbabwe. The media is full of stories about women and girls who have become victims of church-related sexual abuse under the guise of healing. A new spiritual healing philosophy through sexual penetration has greatly exposed the degree of pervasiveness Zimbabwe's churches and beyond have become. The proliferation of this trend is exacerbated by the economic, social, political and religious vulnerabilities Zimbabwean citizenry find themselves in. When is either a woman or a girl facing all these difficulties with little hope from the 'success stories of sexual healing', one is tempted to try it as the only option available after multiple trials of other ways. The paper explores the pervasive issue of sexual abuse of women and girls in Zimbabwe and specifically in the church environment. Utilising the phenomenological paradigm through African Women Theologies as a lens, the study unpacks the complex power dynamics, socio, economic and cultural norms buttressed with a horizon of theological interpretations that contribute to the silencing survivors and the perpetuation of sexual abuse among women and girls in most of Zimbabwe's churches. As established by the study, women and girls become prey to church leaders due to their economic, social, political and spiritual vulnerability. Through a critical examination of the experiences of women and girls, the study highlights the urgent need for spiritual accountability by the churches in Zimbabwe and beyond, craft policy reforms and support systems to either prevent or respond to sexual exploitation.

2. Prophets, Pastors, and Predators: Spiritual Abuse and the Exploitation of Women in African Pentecostalism

Oghenekevwe Kate Jibromah*, **Olatundun Abosede Oderinde & Seyifunmi Damilola Bademosi*** · *Adeyemi Federal University of Education / Olabisi Onabanjo University*

The African continent has experienced phenomenal Pentecostal growth for decades, evolving into a dynamic religious force reshaping African spirituality, politics, and culture. This has also affected the increasing number of Pastors and Prophets in the African continent at an alarming rate. This growth, however, has also resulted in disturbing trends among these Clergies, particularly among Pentecostal churches, in regard to spiritual abuse of women worshippers. This necessitates a thorough investigation to understand the nature of such violations to be able to check them, thereby preserving authentic Christianity and Pentecostalism. This paper, therefore, evaluates the increasing incidence of spiritual abuse and the exploitation of women within African Pentecostalism, concentrating on the manipulative practices of so-called prophets and charismatic pastors. Employing the tools of documented case studies, theological analysis, and feminist critique, the article examines how patriarchal ecclesiastical structures and pseudo-charismatic authority contribute to the systemic marginalisation and abuse of women. It is discovered that African Pentecostal

theology often emphasises spiritual warfare, prophetic authority, and miraculous deliverance. It is equally found that while these subject matters are not inherently abusive, their unregulated application creates a fertile ground for manipulation, especially of the female gender. It is recommended that Churches, especially the Pentecostal brand, should adopt liberative theologies that affirm human dignity and challenge authoritarianism. Feminist and womanist theologians should offer frameworks that foreground the experiences of women and dismantle patriarchal readings of scripture. The research posits an urgent need for ecclesial reform, regulatory oversight, and theological reimagination of power, gender, and pastoral accountability.

3. Faith as Resilience: Perspectives of Anglican Women in a Gender-based Violence Context of Cape Town

Thokozile Mbaya · University of Stellenbosch

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) remains a critical human rights and public health issue facing South African women, leaving women and girls living in constant fear. The South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, has coined GBV as a 'second pandemic'. This article, then, investigates the role of Christian faith as a dual mechanism of resilience among Anglican women living in GBV stricken context of Cape Town, South Africa. The article draws on data from a PhD qualitative case study where in-depth interviews were conducted with women and clergy from an Anglican Church congregation. The data analysis is informed by Intersectional Feminist Theology and Narrative resilience theory and demonstrated that women's faith provides both a source of psychological coping and resources for collective agency and resistance within communities that are challenged by GBV. Fundamentally, the paper highlights the ambivalent role of the church institution in addressing GBV as a challenge at community level, where proactive justice initiatives exist alongside a significant mistrust toward traditional patriarchal authorities by the women. The findings call for contextually grounded, gender-transformative theological engagement and institutional reform to ensure the church functions as a safe and effective site of restoration and justice.

4. Sexual Abuse in Contemporary South African Sangoma Practices: African Spiritual Trajectories in Initiation Sites

Kelebogile Thomas Resane · University of the Free State

One of the observations in the recent resurgences of sangoma callings in South Africa is the initiates' exposure to sexual violence. The press and social media carry the headlines exposing these exploitative sexual experiences of the initiates during the training processes. It is not only the female initiates who go through the abuses, but also the male ones are subjected to sexual abuse by the Gogos (teachers/trainers) or Gobelas (trainers/initiators). The presentation starts by describing sangomaism in South Africa, including its claims to spiritual calling. The objectives of this paper are firstly to elaborate on understanding of sangomaism. Secondly, to conscientise the public about sangomaism in South Africa. Thirdly, to alert the public of the horrific sexual scandals in the training sites where initiates are initiated. Fourthly, to show how sexual abuses are linked to spirituality. Through the social media, literature, online channels such as YouTube, television programmes; definitions of the concepts such as calling, spirituality, spiritual sexuality, concessionary sexual abuses and labour will be explored and explained to demonstrate how sexual abuse in sangomaism claims to be linked to African spirituality. The presentation is a multidisciplinary approach appealing to social analyses, psychology, history, and anthropology, and religious studies, to elucidate and interrogate the subject to discover the rationale behind sexual abuses in sangomas' training sites. Through analytical processes the trajectories will be exposed. Conclusions will be the proposals and appeals for redefinition of African spirituality; and how the initiates should respond in the abusive situations.

Classroom 16 Pentecostalism, Embodiment and Power

Chair: Paul Williams, University of Nebraska at Omaha

1. Pentecostal Spirituality and the Politics of Embodiment: Gender and Sexuality in African Pentecostalism

Siwakhile Ngcobo · University of Pretoria

Debates surrounding religion, gender, and sexuality have become central to the politics of identity and belonging in contemporary Africa. Political rhetoric across the continent frequently draws on religious authority, particularly Pentecostal Christianity to legitimize restrictive norms around gender and sexual expression. Yet within the broader

field of religion and gender studies, scholarship that explicitly examines the intersection of sexuality and spirituality remains limited. African Pentecostalism often advances essentialist constructions of gender and heteronormativity, leaving little conceptual space for alternative identities or embodied experiences. Using an Afro-feminist analytical framework, this paper interrogates how gender, sexuality, and spirituality intersect within African Pentecostal contexts. It explores how Pentecostal discourses shape socio-political understandings of the body, morality, and personhood, and how individuals negotiate these constraints. Ultimately, the paper highlights the need for more nuanced, intersectional approaches to understanding African religious landscapes and the lived realities of those whose identities fall outside normative Pentecostal expectations.

2. Genderization of Pulpit Roles in Nigeria's Pentecostal Space: Opinionizations and Justifications among Church Leaders in South-South, Nigeria

Godwin Bassey Okon · *Rivers State University*

Spirituality is often expressed in doctrines and ordinances with gender as a common denominator. Gender role prescriptions in religious settings are often dovetailed within the framework of "what is right and acceptable versus what is wrong and unacceptable." It is in the light of this that the study examined pulpit roles in Nigeria's Pentecostal space bearing in mind the fact that Pentecostal churches in Nigeria are divergent in gender prescriptions. The study thrust is premised on the Biblical injunction: "...but I suffer not a woman to teach nor usurp authority over the man but to be in silence – 1Timothy 2:12 kjv." This admonition has been subjected to multiple applications thereby allowing for divergences in the expression of spirituality through gender. Study focus was on Pentecostal churches in Nigeria where gender divergences are rife. Anchored on the social role theory the study sought to piece the thread around spirituality as embellished in social orientations drawing from observed gender marginalization. Study design was survey with focus group discussion as the mainstay. Sixty leaders from fifteen prominent churches in south-south Nigeria were drawn using purposive sampling. The church leaders were selected based on position and responsibilities. Focus group discussion was done in six sessions featuring ten leaders per session. Data would be subjected to critical discourse analysis with a view to drawing qualitative inference. It is expected that the findings shall serve to contextualize the reasons, Biblical or non-Biblical, for discriminatory practices on gender role prescriptions in Nigeria's Pentecostalism. Contribution to knowledge shall be two pronged- theory and practice. It is expected that the findings shall either reinforce or negate the notions of the social role theory while charting a pathway for the optimization of spiritual connectivity through gender prescriptions in Christian worship. Study relevance is anchored on SDG 5.

3. Agency, Gendered Behaviour, and Spiritual Contestation: The Experiences of an African Woman Church Founder in South African Pentecostal Townships

Maserole Christina Kgari-Masondo · *University of South Africa*

Gender, behaviour, and the racialised experiences of clergywomen have long been debated within Christian ministry; yet, despite centuries of participation, women have rarely been permitted to assume sustained leadership roles in the church. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, women's freedom, dignity, and equality continue to be undermined by law, custom, and religious traditions in ways that do not affect men. While leadership studies on clergywomen have expanded in North America and other Western contexts, there remains a significant gap in scholarship that foregrounds the experiences of African women church founders, particularly from an African womanist and decolonial perspective. Although some literature suggests that Pentecostalism empowers women, spiritual antagonistic discriminatory practices persist, and contradictory theological messages often undermine this empowerment. Using a qualitative, autoethnographic approach centred on the experiences of a South African Black woman church founder in Black townships, this study found that women's leadership is simultaneously applauded and resisted, producing a dichotomous pattern of affirmation and dehumanisation. Despite the increasing presence of clergywomen church founders, patriarchal resistance remains entrenched, manifesting as spiritual antagonism, discriminatory treatment, and moral delegitimisation of women leaders within churches and Black communities. This paper argues that Pentecostalism in Black townships requires an African decolonial reorientation to confront these persistent forms of spiritual and social oppression. It concludes by proposing Ubuntuisation as an agentive and transformative framework for affirming women's leadership. Ubuntu philosophy, which upholds human dignity, mutual respect, and relational personhood,

aligns closely with biblical values and offers a critical resource for resisting the dehumanisation of women leaders and fostering genuinely inclusive Christian leadership.

4. Botswana Pentecostal Spirituality: A case study of Rev Drew Monageng

Samuel Letang · Kgolagano College

The Pentecostal movement within Christendom has made remarkable strides in Botswana. Although the movement is many faceted in nature, there are noteworthy faculties that are deemed as drivers for this impact. Prayer and fasting is one of those foremost activities. The dynamics of prayer and fasting involves both individual and corporate exercises however, in this paper the flow of thought covers more private exercise with public manifestations. One of the Pioneers of the Pentecostal movement in Botswana is Rev Drew Monageng of the Assemblies of God church. Born in the then Bechuanaland Protectorate he migrated to South Africa to seek employment in the mines where he met Rev Samuel Makhaola who preached to him and converted him to Christianity. That would mark the beginning of over half a century of ministry of pain, toil, perseverance, providence and impact all anchored in prayer and fasting. Now retired as a nonagenarian, he notes prayer and fasting as a denominator for all other graces. Prayer and fasting affects and determines spirituality. A biblical perspective on prayer and fasting shows how it influences effectiveness in ministry, affect the Missio- Dei, Spiritual warfare and establishment of a vibrant local church. An assessment of Rev Drew Monageng's spirituality yield invaluable lessons for today's church. The spirituality of a believer as an individual and indeed corporately is a manifestation of a private, biblical, Spirit filled and led prayer and fasting private life. This spirituality is even more a determining factor in preaching, counselling, administrating, leading and general expansion of the church.

Classroom 17 Women, Leadership and Religious Authority

Chair: Ibukunolu Olodude, Obafemi Awolowo University

1. The Influence of Gender Socialization on the Expression of Spiritual Agency

Peace Nkiru Michael · Ignatius Ajuru University of Education

Social expectations and gender roles often shape how people express their faith and spiritual identity. This study explores how these social influences affect an individual's sense of spiritual agency, including the freedom to act, lead, and make choices in spiritual life. It examines how men and women differ in spiritual expression, leadership, and participation within religious communities. The research also investigates how ideas about masculinity and femininity shape confidence, independence, and authority in faith settings. Using psychological frameworks, it analyzes how upbringing, cultural norms, and religious teaching can both guide and restrict spiritual expression. The study further considers how individuals challenge or redefine these expectations to practice faith with greater authenticity and autonomy. Data will be collected through interviews and surveys to capture lived experiences shaped by gender norms. Findings will show how gender socialization influences spiritual confidence, identity, and empowerment. This research contributes to the psychology of religion and gender studies by highlighting how social factors shape spiritual experience and agency.

2. Inkosazana YamaWeseli: The Neglected Story of Reverend Nikiwe Mbilini – The First African Woman Ordained in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Ntobeko Dlamini · University of KwaZulu-Natal

This article presents an in-depth examination of the life and ministry of Nikiwe Mbilini, the first African woman ordained in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. The researcher argues that Nikiwe Mbilini, rather than the acclaimed Constance Oosthuizen, is the pioneer of women's ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This argument is based on oral testimonies and archival research. From an African womanist perspective, the researcher assesses Mbilini's challenge to the discourse on women's ordination and highlights her groundbreaking role as a pioneer for women in a traditionally male-dominated space. The study also follows Mbilini's racial challenge as a Black woman in a British, white-led church during the apartheid era on her journey for ordination. Mbilini's story is rich with both joy and struggle, vividly illustrating the challenges she faced and the ones she overcame in her ministerial journey. This account stands as a strong example of Mbilini's determination, resilience, and triumphs. This research

aims to ensure that the inspiring legacy of Nikiwe Mbilini is preserved and celebrated, serving as a source of inspiration for future generations.

3. Pastoral Leadership: Reclaiming Agency among Unmarried Kenyan Women Clergy

Carolyn Chepng'eno · *University of South Africa*

The intersection of spirituality, gender and agency for African women clergy, especially those who are unmarried is an important area of inquiry. Pastoral leadership in Christian communities is ideally grounded in spiritual calling, theological training, ordination and ministerial competence. Yet, in many African Christian communities, these qualifications are overshadowed by cultural expectations that treat marriage as the ultimate marker of leadership legitimacy. Additionally, in many African Christian contexts, celibacy is not treated as a valid or dignified choice for women. Such cultural expectations intrude into ecclesial practice and distort the meaning of vocation. This paper interrogates what becomes of unmarried women clergy in Kenya who are spiritually gifted and theologically trained but denied pastoral leadership recognition because they do not conform to marital norms as stipulated by culture. This paper draws on interviews with unmarried Kenyan women clergy alongside a review of existing scholarship on women leadership. Guided by African women's theology, which centers the lived experiences, voices and perspectives of African women to analyze religious and cultural practices, challenge subordination, affirms women's dignity and leadership, and promote liberation and equality, the paper will examine how patriarchal ecclesial structures, theological interpretations of marriage and culturally embedded gender norms intersect to marginalize unmarried Kenyan women clergy and diminish women's agency. African women's theology provides a lens for challenging oppressive traditions while affirming women's dignity, spiritual calling and competence. In doing so, it envisions alternative leadership models that reflect community, liberation and inclusivity, rather than restricting legitimacy to marital status. For these women, agency is a dynamic negotiation of space within patriarchal ecclesial structures. Here, spirituality becomes both a resource and a site of struggle. Spirituality also nurtures resilience, offering these women the courage to navigate hostile ecclesial terrains while envisioning inclusive futures for African Christianity. In this sense, agency for unmarried women clergy is anchored in a spirituality that insists on the fullness of their humanity and leadership. This paper concludes that spiritual authority is not inherently tied to marital status; rather, it emerges from vocation, gifting and sustained engagement in ministry, even when structural and cultural barriers persist.

4. Inequality With Regards to Male and Female Spouses in the Presbyterian Church In South African in Leadership Positions

Hundzukani Khosa · *North-West University*

In the Presbyterian church in South Africa, a minister's wife becomes the chairperson of women's guild in husband's congregation by virtue of being married to a minister. The national chairperson for women's guild is also a minister's wife. However, the minister's husband does not by virtue of being married to a minister becomes the chairperson of men's guild in his wife's congregation nor do they become the national chairperson of men's guild national. Male ministers of the church hold these positions. We can not talk about gender equality in the Presbyterian church in South African when spouses of clergies are treated differently based on their gender. This study aims to challenge the Presbyterian church to rework on its constitution with regards to spouses of clergies and the role they are expected to hold by virtue of being married to a minister. The issue of women in the ministry has been a vexed one historically. In many denominations, the ordination of women has been represented by some form of struggle. Someone once said being a female minister is like being a Black woman twice. A Black woman having to deal with the challenges outside and the challenges in the church. Although there are more female ministers in the church now than in the past, the struggles are still as a fresh wound. We still struggling with gender inequality even years after the ordination of the first female minister. This study looks at gender inequality with regards to male and female spouses in the Presbyterian church in South African in leadership positions. This study will be a qualitative study through a questionnaire and data analyses.

Chair: Philip Boafo, Library Of Africa and The African Diaspora (LOATAD)

1. The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Diasporic African and African Caribbean Communities in the UK

Bidi Broderick · Independent Scholar

This paper is derived from a comprehensive study that investigates the persistence and evolution of African spiritual beliefs, including witchcraft, within Africa and among African and African-Caribbean communities in London. This paper summarises three case studies that exemplify the enduring nature and expressive qualities of these beliefs within the diaspora. For example, a young Nigerian man in London rediscovered Ifá, a form of divination that helped with his mental health; an Akamba woman in Kenya found spiritual explanations for her mother's death; and an African Caribbean grandmother's faith played a crucial role in saving her granddaughter. These studies are based on semi-structured interviews with African and African-Caribbean people who incorporate African religious practices into everyday life. The studies demonstrate how African indigenous spiritual knowledge helps people survive in new environments by navigating complex situations, responding to threats, and managing uncertainty. I suggest that to understand African spirituality as a lived religion, as an active religious practice, we must consider the experiences of individuals directly impacted by adversity who have sought guidance from African spiritual healers and religious experts. I conclude by emphasising that adherence to a belief in spiritual forces remains important to many individuals of African descent. Although some incorporate African spirituality within Christian traditions, others exhibit a clear inclination towards a predominantly African-centered spiritual outlook. Ultimately, I argue that African spirituality resides within a "spiritual suitcase," containing tacit knowledge, an assemblage of ancestral knowledge, beliefs and practices used to explain, predict, and manage misfortune in daily life.

2. Extending the Socio-Spiritual World: The Digital Circulation of Vimbuza among Performers, Researchers, and Spirits

Piotr Cichocki · University of Warsaw

This presentation discusses the vimbuza (pl. of chimbuza) ritual of northern Malawi as a living practice that extends the local socio-spiritual world into digital and media domains. The first section presents a detailed description of the regional context, where vimbuza practitioners engage with a group of ancestral spirits: vyanusi, virombo, vimbuza, and mizimu. Spirit influence is locally conceptualized as affliction and divinatory capacity, and this relationship can also be theorized as a form of co-habitation (Lambek). The analysis traces the tense relationship between vimbuza communities centered around possessed healers (asing'anga) and the institutional authorities of Christian churches. This dynamic dates since the colonial period and manifested in penalties, prohibitions and ecclesial exclusions. The focus is on contemporary mechanisms of exclusion that relegate vimbuza to the margins of the official public sphere (De Witte, Mustapha), even as it is widely present within local healing networks. The second part shifts to methodological and prospective considerations. This review starts with an analysis of initiatives by local scholars and artists aimed at cultural re-appreciation of vimbuza. It then follows with a discussion on the potential of collaborative research specifically, cooperative audio recording projects with socially marginalized vimbuza performers. Particular emphasis is on the reciprocal obligations between researchers, practitioners, and the spirits themselves, which emerge within the digital economies of publication and sale, complicating narratives of possible extraction or commodification. Ultimately, vimbuza is framed not as a relic of a tradition but as a living, empowering practice that prompts a rethinking of modernity, social relations, and the constitution of public spheres. The presentation concludes by conceptualizing the encounter between the spiritual and the digital not as mere heritagization or commercialization, but as a potential extension of the local socio-spiritual world.

3. Esemplastic and Eclectic Gendered Spiritual Imaginations: Lolo Uchechigeme Okwu-Kanu and the Reimagination of Biafran Nationalism

Gloria Adichie · University of Leeds

Recent scholarship has critically engaged with the Neo-Biafran movement, particularly the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its ongoing agitation for the restoration of Biafra - a nation that briefly existed between 1967 and 1970 during the Nigerian Civil War. While several studies have examined the movement's religious dimensions (Nche, 2023; Obi-Ani, 2024; Agbo, 2024 and Ossai and Okwueze 2024), most have focused on male figures such as Mazi Nnamdi

Kanu and Simon Ekpa among others. These studies often highlight how these leaders present the struggle for Biafra as a divine mission, linking it to Christian, Jewish, and African traditional religious beliefs. However, little attention has been given to female voices within the movement, especially Lolo Uchechi Okwu-Kanu, the wife of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, whose ideology and activism offer a unique spiritual and intellectual perspective. This paper explores Lolo Uchechi's engagement with IPOB and her esemplastic and eclectic worldview, which seeks to unify diverse religious and spiritual traditions. Drawing on interviews conducted with her, and by listening to her speeches on Radio Biafra, this paper examines how she interprets the Biafran struggle as a spiritually driven process that transcends conventional religious boundaries. Hence, she views Biafra as a transcendent reality shaped by divine energies and the collective sacrifice of Biafran lives, which she believes influences the cosmic order. By analysing the concepts of esemplastic and eclecticism in relation to her ideology, this paper shows how Lolo Uchechi redefines the spiritual foundation of the Neo-Biafran movement. Her approach expands the understanding of Biafran nationalism beyond male-centred narratives and highlights the importance of women's spiritual and philosophical contributions to the ongoing quest for Biafran restoration.