

Multiple Secularities in Africa and the Diaspora

Workshop at the Centre for Advanced Studies
"Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", Leipzig University,
in conjunction with the working group "Africa" of the German Association for the Study of Religion (DVRW)

01-03 June 2022

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In the field of secularity studies, Africa has remained the 'heart of darkness', marked by a peculiar absence. One line of argumentation suggests that this absence is justified as Africans allegedly never entered what Charles Taylor has described as the 'immanent frame'. In this reading, African ways of being in, or knowing the world are outside the religious-secular divide. This interpretation also suggests that the idea of modernisation as secularisation is an instance of epistemic violence that has underwritten much of Africa's colonial history. However, arguably this position underestimates the impact of the colonial encounter, essentialising and othering African societies as shaped by holistic indigenous cultures rather than differentiated religions. This second interpretation explains secularity's apparent irrelevance by Africa's revenant otherness which formed part of its secularisation while hiding the process. This workshop seeks to tackle epistemological distortions and blind spots through empirical studies of African social realities. In particular, we are interested in the heuristic values of divergent conceptualisations (religious/secular, spiritual/material, sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent, or singularly mundane). Regarding Africa and its diaspora, the power/knowledge topography of religion and secularity surely requires deeper investigation.

With the concept of multiple secularities, we propose to investigate the various ways in which religious and other social spheres or fields of practice are conceptually distinguished and institutionally differentiated. Hence, our workshop does not presuppose secularisation, the grand narrative of modern functional differentiation leading to a decline of religion, nor does it imply, or restrict itself to the investigation of secularism, the ideological-philosophical demand for the exclusion of religion from the public realm. In line with Asad's premise that practices and sensibilities forming 'the secular' are prior to secularism, we hold that slavery and colonialism framed the conceptual distinction and social differentiation of religion in African worlds, but suggest that the complex interplay of different African and European cultures likewise shaped the social construction of multiple secularities. We thus consider secularities as contested arrangements of religious and other spheres, whose dynamics also include processes of de-differentiation and de-secularisation.

Following controversies on the place of magic in modernity and the rise of the occult in politics, economy and medicine, we seek to trace genealogies of the religious and the secular in Africa and the diaspora. These include possible conceptual and institutional precursors of binary religious-secular structures in pre-colonial and colonial societies. A further area of inquiry is the institutional and legal organisation of religious plurality vis-à-vis the state and its executive institutions (e.g. public administration, police, infrastructure development). Religious plurality, especially the near-universal duality of Islam and Christianity alongside traditional and other religions, is a major attribute of postcolonial African states and is discursively enacted and contested in the public arena. Linked to this question is the study of social differentiation: how are various social domains demarcated (law, economy, politics, medicine, education, arts, etc.) and how do they relate to the religious domain? For example, how do faith-based organisations navigate the spaces between secular transnational structures such as the UN and the religious frameworks of their parent institutions?

Lastly, an important point of consideration is the way local conflicts between various actors and institutions may be couched in terms of culturalisation and religionisation. These interdependent processes rest on the assumption of a malleable secular space which allows for reified spheres labelled as 'culture' and 'religion' with divergent legal frameworks and political significance to emerge. Ethnicity, ancestry and nationhood are categories bound up with both of these processes. How are they linked to religious affiliation as identity? In which instances do notions of choice and freedom of conscience prevail and what are spheres in which affiliations are reified, sacralised and declared immutable? How do transatlantic refractions of diasporic African religions impact religious-secular boundaries in the Americas and in Africa? How do radical religious movements such as jihadist groups contest secular public space and the religious-secular divide?

We invite presentations on secularity in Africa and the Diaspora from sociology, anthropology, history, arts and literature, legal, political and religious studies and related fields. Please send abstracts of 200-300 words by 30 September, 2021 to multiple-secularities@uni-leipzig.de. It is planned that the workshop will take place as a hybrid event, with the option of virtual and on-site participation. Depending on the current COVID situation, this may change at short notice. Costs for travel and accommodation may be covered.

Timeline

- 30 September 2021: Deadline for abstract (200–300 words) and short biography
- 31 October 2021: Notification of acceptance
- 14 January 2022: Deadline for short papers (3000 words)
- 1-3 June 2022: Workshop