

Editorial Special Issue 1 (2021):

Angels, Ancestors, Alchemy and the Arts of Africa

This special Issue brings together articles that were first presented at an international colloquium hosted by the University of Pretoria in October and November 2020. Under the title “*Angels, Ancestors, Alchemy and the Arts of Africa*” scholars working in different disciplines and specializing in a variety of methods and topics convened to take a serious look at the ‘unseen’ in Africa – indeed, to take African spirituality, which had so often been misrepresented through colonial and missionary lenses, seriously. Artists, historians specializing in art, visual culture and religion, theologians, anthropologists, archaeologists, conservators, curators and literary scholars submitted papers that were presented in the following four categories, which are also the sub-themes for this special issue: a) Christ, Angels and Ancestors, b) Art and Spirituality, c) Spirituality and Medicine, d) Conservation of objects with spiritual meaning and e) South African literature, ethno-philosophy, political philosophy. The contributions to this special issue cover different historical periods, including the contemporary. They all contribute to challenge misrepresentations of African religious life in our own time.

The multifaceted topic of the colloquium aimed at a better understanding and appreciation of spirituality in Africa by investigating both scholarly and vernacular concepts and beliefs about the seen and the unseen. Through the analysis and assessment of orally transmitted knowledge and visual representations of icons, signs, symbols, rituals and rites, the imagined world can be better understood and duly appreciated. We are taking a long view of the tension, exchange, and convolution between Judeo-Christian and local African traditions of the enchanted word of the unseen. This longitudinal, multi-perspectival approach includes material forms as mediators of the unseen. The offering in this issue is not comprehensive. There are eras, areas and communities that are underrepresented or absent. Trusting that the contributions may encourage continued debate and further investigation, we begin our tour in the Ancient Near East and then wind our way, more or less chronologically, from east to west-central to southern Africa.

Guest Editors of Special Issue 1

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