

Seminar – Lent 2026

Intricate Entanglements: A Missionary Collection of Spiritual Artifacts from West Africa at the Übersee-Museum Bremen

Professor Birgit Meyer

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Tuesday 17 March 2026, 4.00–5.30pm GMT, Lecture Room 7, Faculty of Divinity & Online



Professor Birgit Meyer (PhD, 1995) is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, she studies religion from a material and postcolonial angle. She directs the research program *Religious Matters in an Entangled World* (www.religiousmatters.nl) and co-directs the collaborative Legba-Dzoka research project (<https://religiousmatters.nl/the-legba-dzoka-project-tracking-and-unpacking-the-collection-carl-spiess-ubersee-museum-bremen/>).

Abstract: The starting point for this lecture is my work in a collaborative, international research project – the Legba-Dzoka Project – which investigates the origin, significance and future of a missionary collection from the Ewe-speaking region (now south-east Ghana and south Togo) held at the Übersee-Museum Bremen. This collection, consisting largely of spiritually charged artefacts – dzokawo and legbawo – was given to the museum by Carl Spiess, a missionary with the North German Mission, around 1900. I understand these artefacts as time capsules that contain complex connections between mission, museum, colonialism and conversion and can thus be interrogated as witnesses to this complex history of interdependence. In my lecture, I will a) trace the history of the collection's origins in the missionary-colonial context, b) critically examine the Eurocentric attribution of terms such as ‘idol’, ‘fetish’ or ‘magic,’ c) develop an alternative understanding of the artefacts in the collection as carriers of power, which understands them as an expression of the indigenous Ewe knowledge system, and d) discuss multiple positions formulated vis-a-vis the possibility and desirability of a return of the items in the collection to Ghana and/or Togo, ranging from downright rejection in the name of “idolatry”, to recognition as valuable cultural assets and forms of heritage, to an their embracement as spiritual forces. Arguing that these positions evolve around the secular-religious boundary, I will pay special attention to the notion of heritage, which is situated at the core of that boundary.