



## *Sacred texts/Profane images*

*Dynamics of transmission of religious knowledge:  
in dialogue with Congolese popular painting*

*International conference*

Università della Calabria

4-6 June 2024

### *Scientific committee*

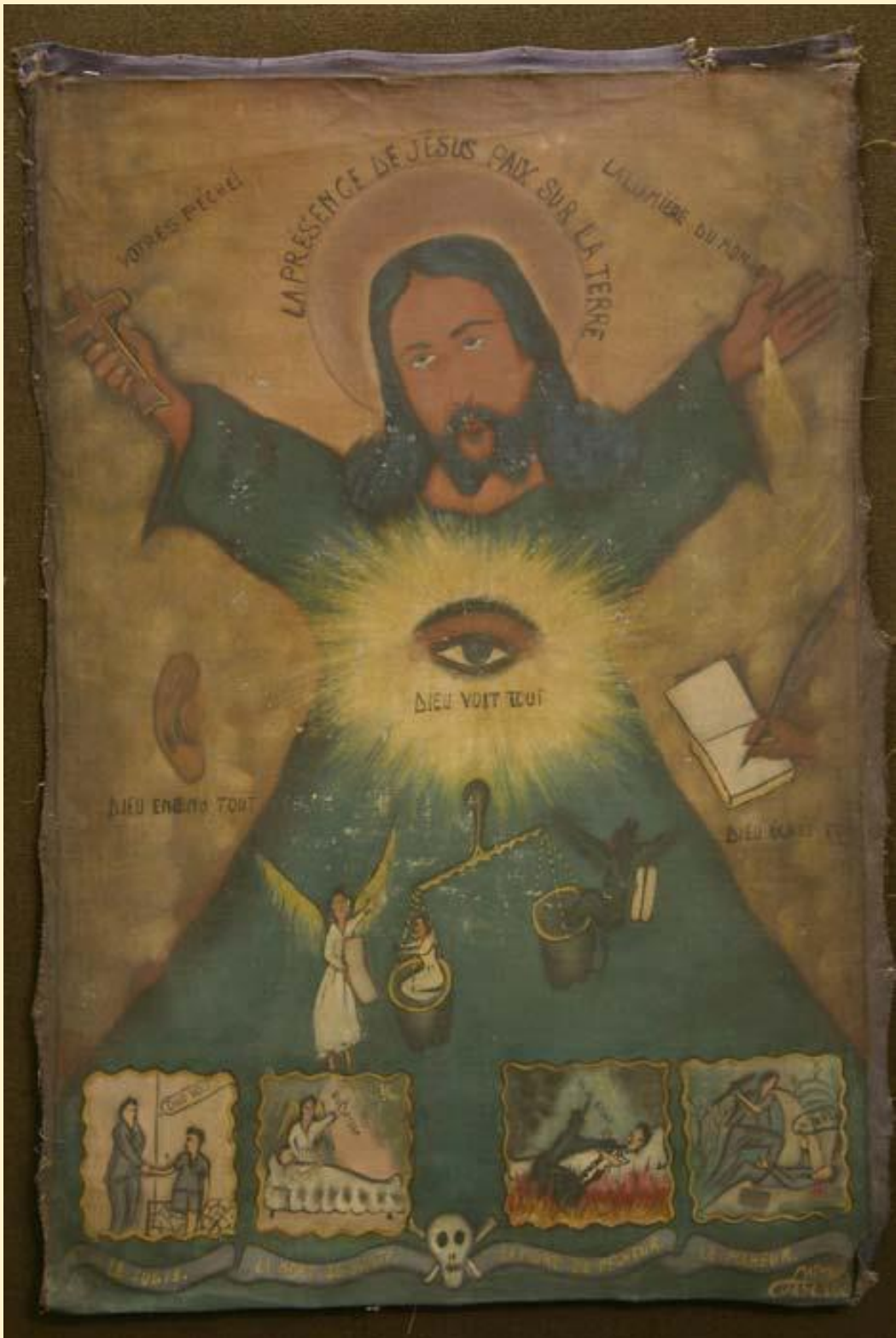
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*La présence de Jésus. Paix sur la terre; « Dieu entend tout, Dieu voit tout, Dieu écrit tout »*  
<http://congoartpop.unical.it> (Collection Jewsiewicki).

## Argument

The historical-cultural heritage expressed by Congolese popular painting shows meaningful traits that stimulate reflection – in light of the most recent acquisitions in the field of Cultural Studies and Religious Studies – on forms and methods of the processes of transmission of the sacred that have their tools and outcomes in the image and which are part of a broader framework of articulation of writing-orality-visual dimension and have implications in the knowledge-power relationship.

As an object deserving recognition and legitimation as a historical source and as a mode of performative representation, urban popular plastic art is an interesting standpoint from where to observe social and cultural processes and, more precisely, to study the interrelationships between sacred text, evangelization and iconography (devotional and otherwise).

The Conference proposes to debate on these themes from an interdisciplinary point of view and in a comparative perspective, extending the gaze to other historical-cultural areas, colonial and beyond, and to the more general dynamics of exchange between high culture and popular culture. In this vein, the Conference aims to be an opportunity for in-depth analysis of two thematic areas organized in two sessions: I) Images and transmission of the sacred; II) Knowledge-powers-representations. At the end of the two sessions a roundtable is organized in order to favor a direct exchange of ideas and sharing experiences aiming at new research perspectives.

The Conference also aims to explore more contemporary dynamics of our times which are characterized by the acceleration of migratory processes and coexistence between people of different cultures; by the coexistence of fluid forms of identity alongside sovereignism and nationalism; by forced, material and cultural uprooting; by the challenges of secularization. In such a framework of reference, the reconsideration of the processes of transmission of knowledge and religious categories seem useful to pave the way to new forms of inclusion and living together.

The first session will focus on questions of methodological nature, but it will propose historical and historiographical issues, with specific reference to the methods of transmission of the ideas and doctrines of the Judeo-Christian religious universe. The reflection will focus on the visual dimension in the experience of the sacred and will look not only at the diffusion of the Christian message in its various declinations, syncretic or in other forms, but also at other religious expressions: from forms of animism, to Islam, up to the experience of prophetism and the new Christian churches, to Pentecostalism, without neglecting the representations of the invisible and the occult.

The second session aims to propose a reading of the 'scientific' and cultural aspects of the relationship between Africa and the West connected to the 'sacredness' and authority of writing. First of all, it will focus on the dual (ambivalent/ambiguous?) value of writing in the field of scientific knowledge and in the affirmation of cultural imperialism (Said 1994), as an 'absolute' value that has fueled (and fuels) 'epistemic violence' (Chakrabarty 2000; Mudimbe 1998) in research practices and in 'scientific' and popular literature, for a long time based on a rigid hierarchical classification of sources which establishes the primacy of the written document. Secondly, in relation to the knowledge-power relationship that arises in colonial and postcolonial contexts, the reflection will focus on the binary reading of authority of writing/misrecognition of 'other' languages.

## I. SESSION – *Images and transmission of the sacred*

Since the beginning of the history of Christianity, the diffusion of the evangelical message has taken place according to a scheme aimed to protect its original doctrinal core, while opening it up and adapting it to other cultures. This is a well-known process, the character and dynamics of which emerge among other things from the numerous documents on enculturation produced by the various Churches and Christian confessions. Within it, visual representations play a role of primordial importance, a space for meeting and interaction between words, images and mental representations. The undisputed centrality of the communicative act had in fact to deal with the difficulties linked to the differences in contexts, values and cultural codes, the use of which – previously limited to the field of linguistic expression – of real or metaphorical, which are well suited to acting as a vehicle for abstract concepts. Undoubtedly marked by the culture of origin, they are very often, by their very nature, transcultural, especially when they refer to the sphere of natural phenomena.

Those who first put the preached word into written form were aware of these potentialities of the image(s). It is emblematic, for example, the proceeding of the author of the Acts, who, while describing the event of Pentecost in terms full of scriptural and symbolic references, elaborates a model and a sort of communicative code, centered precisely on the connection between word and image, as regards to similarities and sensorial juxtapositions rather than objective correspondences: “Suddenly a roar came from the sky, *almost* (ὥσπερ) a rushing wind, and filled the whole house where they were staying. There appeared to them tongues like (ὥσει) of fire, which were divided, and they rested on each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, *as* (καθὼς) the Spirit gave them the power to speak, express oneself” (Acts 2:2-4).

The image thus acts as a repository of theological meanings characterized by a precise historical and cultural connotation; it allows to activate a process of equally strongly characterized typological (or figural) signification; refers to a widely disseminated referential and symbolic heritage. Just think of the dove that all four evangelists talk about, e.g. in the story of the baptism of Jesus (Mt 3.16-17; Mc 1.10-11; Lc 3.22; Jn 1.32). In that context, it gives shape to the Jewish-Christian idea of the “Spirit of God” (in certain rabbinic traditions it is also an image of the people of Israel: TgCt\* 2,12), but in other passages of the Scriptures symbolic values prevail which they insist less on the denotative register, being more focused on poly-referentiality and connotation (sometimes taking meanings from other oriental cultures): messenger of peace, symbol of freedom, beauty, marital fidelity, etc. (cf. Gen 8.11, Sal 55.7, Ct 1.15).

The images lend themselves well to reifying the theological word by translating it into simple, immediately perceivable forms, thus exploiting their universal usability or in any case their wide diffusion. Therefore, in contexts that are very different and distant, chronologically and geographically, from those of the beginning, images have proven to be a precious tool for transferring elements of religious knowledge to ‘other’ cultures and ideological structures, often undergoing a process of selection, adaptation or actual re-semanticization.

This is the thematic core of the historical-religious part (but also of religious anthropology, sociology, psychology...) of the Conference, in which the intention is to investigate the theoretical presuppositions of the use of the image, the possible typological categorizations, the questions linked to history of historiography and the history of studies. There are two privileged areas of study: the beginnings of Christianity, the moment of construction of archetypes and original experimentation of their effectiveness; the historical processes of diffusion of the Christian message in various areas of European civilizations. African (with particular reference to Central Africa) and Asian. In the comparative key of the history of religions we will then look at other religious experiences: from the different forms of animism, to Islam, up to the experience of prophetism and the new Christian churches, to Pentecostalism, without neglecting the forms of syncretism and representations of the invisible and the occult.

## II. SESSION – *Knowledge-powers-representations*

“*God hears everything, God sees everything, God writes everything*” we read in many devotional paintings (*ex-voto*) produced by Congolese popular painting during the 20th century. Through the written word, art explains the structural link between monotheism and the authority of writing, one of the founding factors of the knowledge-power relationship established by Europeans in the colonies: the religious message – and its cultural and political implications – originates and is conveyed by the action of the missionaries, to whom in the Belgian Congo was assigned an almost exclusive educational and disciplinary role (“the care of the souls”) of the ‘natives’.

The second session intends to observe the knowledge-power articulation in the relationship between the West and Africa. The sacredness and ‘sovereignty’ of writing, its power to define universal knowledge and to establish a relationship of domination upon the Other, in relation to the ‘emptiness’ and ‘inconsistency’ of other languages and modes of representation: orality, the visual dimension, the performance. These languages are considered ‘profane’ in consideration of the essential character of writing in the production, codification and diffusion of knowledge.

Congolese urban popular plastic art was the subject of prolonged pioneering work of collection and scrutiny, conducted from the end of the 1960s until the end of the last century by Johannes Fabian, Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Léon Verbeek. The heritage of long-lasting work– today preserved at the Africa Museum (Tervuren - Belgium) and in digital version available on the web (<https://www.lubumarts.africamuseum.be>; <https://www.congoartpop.unical.it>) – consists of more than ten thousand paintings and represents a widespread and multifaceted representation ‘from below’ on the present and on the colonial and post-colonial past. As stated by a rich literature, artefacts are special ‘places of memory’ that perform a significant dialogic function: they raise questions and invite us to evoke and share subjective and collective memories; at the same time, they express languages in the wake of an African (post)modernity that calls into question the claimed universal value of Western linear narrative.

In an illuminating historiographical analysis, Peter Burke (2001) criticizes those who “do not yet take the documentary value of images seriously enough”, pointing out the widespread phenomenon of the “invisibility of the visual”; on the other hand, if some fundamental studies in the historical-visual field have investigated in an innovative way the complexity of the themes of ‘representation’ - think first of all of *Occhiacci di legno* (2019 [1991]) by Carlo Ginzburg –; in the sector of contemporary history the visual dimension has not yet established itself as an autonomous perspective (Petruzzo 2021). At the same time, in the first decade of the new millennium there is a fruitful dialogue between art history and anthropology, by virtue of which aesthetic perspective and ethnographic investigation are increasingly “linked by mutual implications” (Severi 2003).

The meanings and value of African historical-artistic production, careless readings of it, when not inspired by ‘scientific’ or Eurocentric prejudice, are often found both in the field of research and in that of multicultural comparison. Jean-Loup Amselle (2005: 11) noted the potential that African art expresses in the work of regeneration of contemporary art, to underline that in the West the emphasis is on the “prevalence of the ‘invention’ of art contemporary African art by Western demiurges”, where the liveliness and historicity of local contexts is neglected: “African art has never ceased to evolve in relation to and in opposition to nearby and distant arts, and this well before the 20th century”. In the Western academic context, studies on this subject have got little consideration, almost that reserved for *divertissement*. On the other hand, from the point of view of the Euro-African comparison, there is the easy downgrade of Congolese popular painting as naive art, in a negative sense: synonymous with ‘banal’ and ‘superficial’ (Jewsiewicki, Pype 2020); reflection of spontaneity and simplicity, which sometimes arouses ‘only’ (or ‘great’) ‘sympathy’. In short, a new stereotype about Africa (Giordano 2022).

Regarding the changes affecting Congolese art during the twentieth century, it should be noted that in their original form images do not tell stories, but “make present”, expressing the historicity of the authors and of Congolese society: they therefore testify to a common attitude many societies of the Global South to “reclaim the ability to represent themselves in history” (Chakrabarty 2000; Inden 1986). “The figurative representation in public space is a device for sharing and discussing knowledge, and therefore representations, about the world” (Jewsiewicki). In its relationship with the West, Congolese art has implemented and innovated the formal and substantial elements that allow it to acquire control of Western modernity. The Western initiative has changed the transition from the production of images for public space to their production for private use; and “in private life, religious art has been approached through various themes”. (Verbeek 2008: 250). In producing images on paper, Westerners suggest that images illustrate and narrate stories, particularly tales or dreams. From this relationship arise the “narrative images”, which use writing to contextualize and clarify, explicitly recognizing its authority, through the citation of sayings and proverbs, from the Holy Scriptures. Religious art becomes primarily narrative and “artists have drawn on virtually every book of the Bible for their material” (Verbeek 2008: 226). In multiple cases, in the paintings “*Le texte transfère sur l’image profane l’autorité des Écritures*” (Jewsiewicki 2023 : 136-137).

## **- Axes of analysis**

### (I)

- Power and application of the religious image;
- “The mind’s eye”: forms of visualization of the sacred and the profane in orality and writing;
- missionaries and the diffusion of religious knowledge: imagery and categories of thought, perceptions and reinventions; precepts, stories, symbols and images of Christianity: perceptions and reinventions;
- collective knowledge and experiences at the basis of the religious image; for an aesthetic of the religious;
- interpretation and dissemination of sacred texts and moral, cultural and political principles conveyed by Christianity in Central Africa and elsewhere: ‘scenes’, figures, events and words of the Old and New Testaments in iconography;
- popular knowledge and practices in the representation of biblical and evangelical realities;
- knowledge codified by writing and their popular perceptions: transpositions, ‘profanations’ of dogmas, precepts, religious ideas through imagination (visions and dreams) and images of the divine and the relationship with the religious;
- paths of re-appropriation and reinvention of signs and contents westernized over time;
- cult of images and cult of the word: prophetism, the new Christian churches, charismatic movements, Pentecostalism;
- writing-orality-visual articulation in real and digital artistic (and otherwise) representations (and their diffusion on the web); and of the religious and of moral, cultural and political values inspired by it.

### (II)

- History, historicity, memory: linear narrative and African performative representation;
- the visual and the “invisibility of the visible”: the developments of anthropology and the delay of historiography;
- human sciences and hierarchy of sources: past and present;
- the reproduction the real: technology and power of photography in the colonial world and ‘misrecognition’ of the ‘traditional’ visual;
- writing and practices of domination of Western ‘scientific’ knowledge;

- writing-orality-visual articulations in plastic art in Central Africa;
- images and imaginaries of power and the state-society relationship;
- autocracy and political propaganda: word, image, 'staging';
- social protest between 'high' and 'low': orality, visual, performance in 'militant' art;
- multicultural developments of the writing-orality-visual articulation on the web and social networks.

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## **– Call for papers**

The organizational committee have invited renowned scholars to the conference and also it considers a limited number of interventions of researchers whose communication proposal will be evaluated by the scientific committee.

Communication proposals (max. 2000 characters) have to be sent by January 31st, along with by a bio-bibliographic note of the author (max. 1000 characters).

Acceptance of the proposals will be communicated by February 20, 2024.

The Conference's program will be released by April 2024.

Proposals must be sent to the following addresses:

benedetto.clausi@unical.it

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Transport and accommodation fees are at expenses of the selected contributors. During the conference, lunch will be offered by the organization, which will also offer participants two dinners, at the beginning and end of the Conference.

### **Languages**

The conference's languages are Italian, French and English.

### **Publication**

The texts of the communications – to be delivered by December 2024 – will be evaluated by the scientific committee and published during 2025.