



CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES WINTER SEMESTER 2023/2024

Each Tuesday | 18:15-19:45

Location: Room 000.235, Seminar room,
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Link for virtual attendance:

<https://fau.zoom.us/j/63672581746>

17.10.2023

Alternative Rationalities and the Reinvention of Tradition: Vedic Science and the Agnihotra-Fire Ritual

Prof. Dr. Andreas Nehring (FAU, CAS-E)

The Agnihotra-ritual, I will present and discuss in this lecture, in the form in which it is commonly practiced today is rather simple. It is performed in the evening at sunset and in the morning at sunrise. It only takes a small vessel, made of copper, some cowdung, unpolished rice and a bit of ghee, clarified butter, some mantras have to be chanted and the whole procedure only lasts couple of minutes. What has been striking my interest is that we can observe a growing number of “scientific” publications in which the claim, to document and prove the efficacy of this ritual especially for health and the conservation or even improvement of the environment. Not only in India but also in other parts of the world the ritual is performed by a growing number of practitioners, who celebrate Agnihotra or Homa, referring thereby to an ancient Vedic ritual.

24.10.2023

The Transmission of *Yijing* Knowledge and Divination Practices in Contemporary China

Zheng Liu (CAS-E)

The purpose of this lecture is to show the teaching and learning of *Yijing* knowledge and divination practices in the “*Yijing* community” in mainland China. The learning of *Yijing* knowledge relates to both to the *Yijing* text and debates related on divination in sinology. The divination techniques are two *Yijing*-based divination methods, Meihua Yishu 梅花易数 and Liu Yao 六爻, and two *Yijing*-derived divination methods, Qimen Dunjia 奇门遁甲 and Sizhu 四柱. The first part of this lecture will highlight what *Yijing* knowledge and divination practices offers today’s learners, including the target audience and their motivation for learning. The second part of the lecture will focus on the curricula, and the teaching content will be explored through a combination of ethnographic data collected in the field since 2013 and textual analysis of Chinese cosmology, philosophy, and sinological materials. Finally, I will show how explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge in divination have been articulated through “learning by doing it”, supported by empirical evidence.

31.10.2023

Family Constellation Therapy in the Context of Esotericism

Dr. Julia Gyimesi (CAS-E fellow)

In the past decades, Bert Hellinger’s family constellation method has become a highly popular psychotherapeutic modality. By integrating several trends and theories related to family and individual therapies, parapsychology, religion, philosophy, and spirituality, the family constellation method developed into an attractive psychotherapeutic approach for several laymen and experts. The basic psychotherapeutic concepts of the family constellation theory evolved as an amalgamation of several earlier psychotherapeutic methods such as psychoanalysis, Virginia Satir’s family reconstruction theory, Gestalt therapy, and Moreno’s psychodrama. Numerous elements of religious rituals were added to this amalgamation by Hellinger, thereby lending a rather spiritual character to the practice of family constellation. Furthermore, family constellation therapy is implicitly built on ideas—such as that of the collective unconscious or “telepathic” communication—that have not been incorporated into the contemporary methodological mainstream of psychology. Thus, in family constellation therapy these ideas represent a kind of rejected knowledge. Given that parallels between Western esoteric thought and the family constellation system developed by Hellinger can be observed, in my lecture, I aim to explore the extent to which family constellation therapy is embedded within esotericism.





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07.11.2023

The Aesthetic Assemblage of Hawaiian Hula Dance: A Framework for Researching Practices in Their Embodied Dimensions and Global Perspective

Dr. Lina Aschenbrenner (CAS-E)

Global Hawaiian hula dance is a practice originating from and still intrinsically linked to Native Hawaiians. Its international group of hula dancers spreads worldwide. An in-depth look at local and global aesthetic assemblages of hula shows the aesthetic effect—the affects, emotions, experiences, and effect on meaning making—arising in the complex postcolonial social contexts of practices and practitioners. Looking at the example of global Hawaiian hula, this lecture evaluates, first, the importance of looking at bodies and embodied processes, when aiming to grasp the societal relevance of esoteric practices and religious and cultural phenomena in general. Second, it introduces the aesthetic assemblage to successfully incorporate bodies and the body-level in cultural-studies research. Here, a special focus lies on establishing a framework for the research of practices as and in their global entanglements or/and focusing on a global scale and comparative perspective.

14.11.2023

On the Possibility of Esoteric Practices in the Amerindian Andes: The Perspective of Witches and a Ritual Song to Heal and Dance

Dr. Juan Rivera (CAS-E fellow)

The literature on witchcraft (*brujería*), hidden divinatory practices (*hechicería*) and ritual healing (*curanderismo*) in Andean studies has been based both on ethnohistorical and ethnographic accounts. Most of this collected evidence focuses on suppression and punishment by religious authorities who search for hidden, illicit practices. The ensuing "resistance" or "survival" perspective about indigenous non-Christian practices is not usually accompanied by a reflection on the relevance of its conceptual tools in Amerindian contexts. Are dichotomies such as secrecy/openness and magic/religion or notions such as religious specialist fully applicable to the study of Andean worldviews? Addressing this question, this lecture draws primarily on my observations during my own fieldwork among Quechua-speaking indigenous groups. I examine two specific cases. The first is a ritual song called "jaynallo," sung in a deliberately incomprehensible language during both ritual healing sessions and a dance called "danza del cascabel." Its unintelligibility is discussed in terms of the role and value of formal discourse in indigenous understandings of power. The second case is an ancient female mythic figure referred to as *bruja* or *achiké*, who can be dangerous or malicious only when she succeeds in imposing her "perspective" on humans. But paradoxically, once this *achiké* is seen as non-human, she becomes relatively easy to defeat (or even ridicule). I analyse this dynamic in the light of the theory of perspectivism. Finally, I suggest that these two cases can be useful in understanding the particularities of Amerindian esoteric practices.

**21.11.2023
on Zoom**

Chased by Blessings: The Metaphysics of the Olfactory

Dr. James Michael Edmonds (Arizona State University)

The ontological turn in socio-cultural anthropology has opened the possibility of orienting theoretical and methodological investigation into the worlds of the 'other' through different paradigms of existence. Critiques of this approach are equally diverse and have often focused on the underlining Western theoretical bases of those who call themselves a part of the ontological turn. Concurrently, Religious Studies and Comparative Religion scholars continue to debate, critique, and disagree about whether religion as a category is productive in making sense of the lived religion. This discussion brings together methods and theories from the ontological turn together with the fact that the Western definition of religion exists as a part of my interlocutor's experience to present the enchanted world that continues to chase the participant-observer. My discussion is based on ethnographic research spanning Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore embedded in the performances of Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf. Habib Syech has performed *salawat* (Islamic devotional songs) 20 times a month for tens-of-thousands since 1998. This assemblage of socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious sensibilities with the selling of hermit crabs and the smell of agarwood is not simply a reflection of a new type of Islamic movement or religious festivalization. Rather, I will discuss how the aroma of blessings (*baraka*) absorbed into my skin to provide a different existence that continues to challenge Western paradigms of knowledge that are always already at play in the metaphysics of these performances of *salawat*.





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23.11.2023
3pm on Zoom

The Tangki, A Spirit Medium in Chinese Temples in Kelantan. Ethnographic Perspectives

Dr. Alexander Stark and Dr. Yohan Kurniawan (Universiti Malaysia Kelantan)

The Chinese spirit medium (Tangki) is important in many Chinese temples. Tangki is a person who chooses, and God uses their body. Tangki is popular in Taoist communities. Before becoming tangki, a person will experience a rather severe illness, which usually disappears after they agree to become a tank. Tangkis are often connected to the Chinese folk religion known as gods and goddesses. The gods present in the individual who becomes a medium are usually those found in Taoist followers' beliefs, such as God Kwang Kong, Goddess Kwan Im, and God Sun Wu Kong (monkey king). In the Malaysian state of Kelantan, spirit mediums play a significant role in several Chinese temples. This study aims to identify the phenomenon of Chinese spirit mediums occurring in some Taoist temples in Kelantan. Researchers have observed the activity of tangkis. God and goddess have different abilities, such as maintaining good fortune, wealth, and health. Interviews were conducted to determine why a person was chosen to become a spirit medium. The researcher recorded the videos during the mediumization process. It was discovered that the tangkis play an essential role in the Chinese community of Kelantan, and Malaysia's local belief systems became a part of the Chinese folk religion in Kelantan. Furthermore, the researchers looked at tangki behavior, symbolic meaning, and the language used by spirit mediums.

28.11.2023

American Idols and West African Spirits: Bewitching Superstars in New York City

Dr. Jane Parish (Keele University)

Examining Ghanaian spirits in New York City, what do West African witchcraft discourses have to say about the illusion of celebrity and a mass-mediated culture transfixed by the magic of fame? These apparently very different phenomena seem to be entangled as they share common significant traits: people worship spirits and Gods whose reality is always questioned, the same way others follow pop stars and movie idols whose made-up authenticity is scrutinized through the desire to reach the sincere person behind the image. This article looks at the dichotomy between exposure and disguise as an inner feature of success and how, curiously, this same dichotomy sustains West African witchcraft narratives.

05.12.2023

Identity, Body and Emotion among Yoga and Meditation Practitioners in Brazil

Dr. Cecilia Bastos (CAS-E fellow)

The objective of this presentation is to discuss the dimensions of identity related to the body and emotions, based on the ongoing case study of over ten years among yoga and meditation practitioners in Brazil. My research aims to understand how the yogic identity is constructed, first visible in the transformation of their bodies, and seeming to involve the adoption of a "yogic lifestyle, worldview or way of thinking." Seeing the self as beyond the body and mind—since it would be atma—involves a shift towards understanding it as beyond thought, speech and actions, whose aim is to acquire a command over emotions and an "objective" and "critical" mind. On that account, it will be discussed how the articulation between identity, body and emotion is developed through the resignification of personal experiences.

12.12.2023

The Shades of Emptiness: The Alchemical Teaching of the Master Wei Yao 魏堯

Dr. Iliia Mozias (CAS-E fellow)

In 1924-1925, Wei Yao 魏堯, a member of the fourth generation of the influential Western School of Internal Alchemy, delivered lectures that are still used as a widely circulated textbook by members of the school. This lecture explores Wei's teachings on emptiness and the school's unique method of practice. The ultimate goal of alchemical practice is the attainment of unity with emptiness, the primordial state of the universe and humanity prior to the manifestation of form and matter. Traditionally, alchemists refine essence, qi, and spirit within the physical body to create an immortal body that returns to emptiness after leaving physical form. The Western school, however, emphasizes the cultivation of emptiness itself. According to Wei Yao, emptiness is a creative force that constantly exists, while the body is a "puppet" Thus, the optimal approach is to disregard the physical body and focus on emptiness from the outset. By unifying the emptiness of the mind, body and universe, practitioners set in motion a natural process that leads to the creation of a new immortal self. This lecture focuses on a close textual analysis of Wei Yao's lectures and his other works. It examines the concept of "emptiness" in the context of alchemical self-cultivation, exploring the ever-shifting nuances, perceptions, and uses of emptiness in the process of self-cultivation, while highlighting the straightforward yet potent methods of practice that were employed by alchemists and enabled them to harness the transformative and creative potential of emptiness.





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19.12.2023

Magic as Social Mediation

Dr. Jesper Sørensen (Aarhus Universitet)

Broad concepts such as 'religion' and 'magic' have been the target of sustained criticism within the last four decades. Claimed to be merely parochial expressions of Eurocentric conceptual hegemony, critical theory has suggested giving up on these concepts as etic categories of classification. In this paper, I shall argue that nothing is gained from such terminological cleansing. Rather, we should perpetually reinterpret these broad concepts as instrumental, synthetic categories useful when delineating domains of particular interest and identifying recurrent behavioral patterns. Based on a stipulative definition of magic focusing on its instrumental features, the lecture then suggests a socio-cognitive explanation of magic as (a) the behavioral mobilization of basic cognitive procedures aimed to; (b) effect a change related to recurrent problems of the nurture sphere of the extended family by; (c) embedding these actions in ritualized behavioral patterns specified by the sphere of the community. Whereas (a) and (b) are core properties of magic, (c) points to how collective rituals transform problems related the nurture sphere into anthropo-techniques sustaining social interaction at the level of the community. The functional role of magic in negotiating relations between nurture and community spheres further points to developments when such techniques are embedded in larger, more complex social organization.

09.01.2024

Translation and the Study of Esotericism

Prof. Dr. Birgit Menzel (CAS-E)

In an interdisciplinary project on esoteric practices from a global perspective translation is omnipresent. However, both translations and their agents often remain invisible. Texts, terms, ideas, and cultures are being translated, in written, oral or intersemiotic ways; often the term is used in a metaphorical sense. The same invisibility applies to the social and political role of the translators. Scholars and practitioners are often unaware of the fact that they serve as interlingual and/or intercultural translators. They are social agents, who make choices. But why and how do they make their choices? In an increasingly monolingual global English academic community, many obstacles pass unnoticed. Scholars of various cultures convene, often unaware of the constant bumpy road of translation they ride towards the goal of global communication. Translation can connect and mediate; but it can also create boundaries. Some translations become dominant hegemonic, others are deviant, innovative or even transformative texts. This is especially significant in the context of esotericism ('rejected knowledge'). Translation Studies offer tools for a critical and more self-reflexive action when studying religious and esoteric practices. In this lecture, I will explore in which ways Translation Studies could cross-pollinate the study of esotericism. I will introduce a culturally oriented approach (microsociology of translation). The aim is to invite scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds to make more conscious, non-normative strategic decisions when they are confronted with multiple ways of translation in their work and life.

16.01.2024

Hybrid Pathways to Orthodoxy: Esoteric Practices in 'Sharia Compliant' Exorcism

Prof. Dr. Dominik Müller (FAU, CAS-E)

My presentation will address attempts of systematically "purifying" Muslim Malay cultural practices related to invisible worlds in the Sultanate of Brunei, which are linked to a massive state driven process of centralizing, bureaucratizing and controlling Islam related practices by political and legal means. Newly established "Sharia serving practices" which have been generated in this process over the past two decades, however, have become culturally re embedded and are simultaneously drawing upon multifold transnational symbolic registers, in rather multi directional ways that complicate their orthodox framing. In the main ethnographic example, water crystal photography conducted by the globally famous Japanese esoteric celebrity person Masuru Emoto, digital media practices and the rationalizing quest for evidence and scientization have become integrated into the project of promoting a new form of state controlled "proper" Islamic exorcism and fighting (or "re educating") its traditional practitioners. I will contextualize these hybrid pathways to orthodoxy vis a vis their locally specific their post colonial historical trajectory, i.e. the discursive substrate of bureaucratizing Islam in the Bruneian "M.I. State", while simultaneously making reference to some transnational and trans regional entanglements which are shaping the developments at play in the observed case study.





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23.01.2024 **Islamicate Magic in the Twelfth Century: Hermetic, Islamic, and Jewish Entanglements**

Dr. Liana Saif (University of Amsterdam)

This lecture will turn attention to the twelfth century as a turning point in the development of Islamicate magical traditions, when Islamicate Hermetic discourse adopted and adapted late antique and medieval Jewish practices and concepts. Occultists such as Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī (1160-1229) in his *al-Kitāb al-Shāmil fī al-bafir al-kāmil* and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149-1209) in his *al-Sirr al-Maktūm* valorised a not-yet-Lettrist “religious” brand of magic that incorporated Jewish liturgy, the regimentation of angelic and demonic hierarchies, the use of Hebrew angelic names, *voces magicae*, and Jewish adjuration formulae. All of these elements are absent in the natural-astral magic of the tenth-century *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*. The lecture will highlight an important juncture in the history of Islamicate magic that precedes the widespread use of magic based on the Science of Letters and Divine Names, arguably even giving way to it.

30.01.2024 **Śrīvidyā Goes West: Continuities and Transformations in Cross-Cultural Encounters**

Dr. Monika Hirmer (CAS-E fellow)

South Asians make humans divine, Westerners make Devī [the Goddess] human!: with these words Rajeswaramma, senior priestess in a South Indian Śrīvidyā temple complex centered around the benevolent and erotic goddess Tripurasundarī, summarizes her impressions of the tantric paths followed by South Asian practitioners on the one hand and Westerners on the other. Popularized in the West by Osho in the 1970s, esoteric paths that build in various ways on ancient South Asian tantric traditions are increasingly attracting international followers with their open approach to sex and the promise of worldly powers, leading to cross-cultural encounters and adaptations of various kinds. In this lecture I will present preliminary findings on the continuities and transformations of Śrīvidyā as it is transposed from its South Asian contexts into Western settings. Through praxis-oriented fieldwork, I examine how the tradition is practiced in a range of contemporary Western contexts including the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. As this study complements my earlier project on the practice of Śrīvidyā in contemporary southern India, it will provide a comparative perspective. Combining anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies, this project: a) provides an ethnographic documentation of Śrīvidyā in Western contexts; b) discusses, through a genealogical-archeological lens, what bodies, conceptions of humanness/divinity and existentiality are necessary for ritual efficacy; and c) compares cross-culturally how Śrīvidyā beingness unfolds in South India and in Western contexts.

06.02.2024 **The Gorilla in the Room: The Right to Practice Animal Sacrifice Amidst Growing Animal Rights Activism**

on Zoom

Prof. Danielle Boaz (University of North Carolina)

My lecture will explore the role of animal sacrifice in African diaspora religions and how laws against this practice have been a common mechanism for restricting their religious freedom in the twenty-first century. It will place these limitations on African diaspora religious freedom in the context of a global movement to restrict the ritual slaughter of animals and will explore how such regulations often represent efforts to eradicate minority/minoritized religions. It will also discuss how devotees have responded to such attacks on their religious freedom, including changing their rituals and altering the narratives about the purpose of animal sacrifice to try to make their practices more palatable to outsiders.

