Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

1. Academic program of the planned Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (*Kollegforschungsgruppe*)

1.1. Area of study and methodological approach

A Chinese *fengshui* master, an Israeli expert in *kabbalah ma'asit*, a German *Ritualmagier*, an Indian *vastu*-offeror, an Egyptian *sahir*, a Caribbean *brujo*, a West African *Vodun* practitioner, a Malayan *bomoh* exorcist: what do these figures share in common? How can we gain an understanding of their experiences and practices? Can we undertake a comparative study of the practices of these experts without allowing Eurocentric stereotypes or an 'imperialism of categories' (Rudolph 2005) to distort our analysis?

Throughout the world, we encounter practices related to the prediction of and attempt to control and manipulate contingent life events which, despite an increasingly dominant scientific and technical discourse, continue to exhibit remarkable persistence. This persistence is not simply a matter of mere survival in an otherwise disenchanted world (as Bennet 2001 still seems to suggest), but rather casts doubt upon the very narrative – or modern myth – of the disenchantment of the world. The aims of this project are: (1) to open up a global field of research on such practices from a transcultural perspective; (2) to compare practitioners and their interpretation, rationalisation and legitimation strategies; and (3) to develop a theoretical explanatory model for the resilience of such practices in the face of the globally dominant scientific and technological discourse. In addition, through the development of a nuanced metalinguistic classification schema, the project will: (4) contribute to a taxonomic framework for the future investigation of such practices ('boundary-work' in the sense of Gieryn 1983); and, finally, (5) to engage with the current debate about the possibilities and boundaries related to the undertaking of post-phenomenological, non-essentialist comparative research. In this respect, the project will utilise the format of the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (*Kollegforschungsgruppe*; henceforth KFG) in order systematically to open up an extensive research field and thereby seek to overcome the growing specialisation and regionalisation of research in the humanities. Esoteric practices, despite being a subject of global relevance with a high potential for interdisciplinary innovation, have, to date, been studied only sporadically and in isolation. Hence, a more collaborative, integrated academic framework is required. The proposed project, with its contemporary and global focus, brings together approaches from the fields of cultural and social anthropology (Ethnologie), religious studies (including the cognitive study of religion and ritual), area and literary studies, as well as social and political science.

1.1 State of research and preparatory work

We still lack a globally applicable conceptual framework for the aforementioned practices and the rationalities that inform them. In the Western academic discourse, the term 'esotericism' is commonly employed, the contemporary range of meanings of which emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century (Bergunder 2010). It is typically used to designate forms of spirituality that are characterised by special knowledge ('higher knowledge': Stuckrad 2010), a dialectic relationship between secrecy and revelation, specialist expertise, as well as being subject to social precarity and

processes of cultural inclusion and exclusion (a definitional overview: Asprem 2015). Recent research has distanced itself from the long prevalent approach of Antoine Faivre, who proposed six typological qualities of esotericism (primary: universal correspondences; living nature; imagination and mediation; transmutation; and secondary: concordance of traditions; transmission of knowledge: Faivre 1998). Due to various weaknesses in the model (one objection is that it raised mere variants of esotericism that existed in early modern Europe to the status of ideal types), in addition to a more general discomfort with such phenomenological or essentialist approaches, the commonly-accepted narrative today is that esoteric ideas and practices have been and/or are being excluded and marginalised by the dominant discourses that shape such world views as irrational, ineffective or heretical, and so need to be understood as alternative or deviant modalities of knowledge ('rejected knowledge': Hanegraff 2012; critiqued by Asprem 2021). Our delineation of this field of research is based on these more recent definitions, but transcends them in two important respects.

On the one hand, we take esotericism as neither a specifically Western phenomenon nor a historically unique line of tradition, to be situated merely within the framework of a pluralistic history of religions in Europe. In recent years, there has arisen an intense debate about the rejection of 'Western' in the notion of 'Western esotericism' (see, e.g., Granholm 2013, Asprem 2014b, Hanegraaff 2015, Strube 2021). Proponents of this position argue that the concept of esotericism can, thereby, be re-conceptualised and fruitfully applied to approaches of entangled and global history. There has been a similar effort to globalise the semantically-related concept of occultism, thus opening it up to analyses on a global scale ('global occultism': Bogdan/Djurdjevic 2013; Green 2015). Although the opening up and expansion of the concept of esotericism for a transcultural analysis forms the foundation of the KFG, we distance ourselves from these debates, for it is characteristic of the aforementioned studies that, instead of the hitherto dominant Eurocentric perspective, processes of historical diffusion and transfer have come into focus, as a result of which 'Western esotericism' has tended to assume the garb of an import or export product – or both. From the viewpoint of a yet-to-be-written 'global history of religions' (Bergunder 2020), theosophy, for example, is now interpreted as a religious movement which has systematically transgressed geographical, cultural, religious and conceptual boundaries ('transgressing boundaries': Krämer/Strube 2020). Indeed, there is much to be gained from analysing esoteric ideas, practices and groupings from the perspective of entangled history. An exclusive reliance upon a diffusionist approach means, however, that many practices and practitioners with few or no historical connections (like some of those mentioned at the outset) cannot be subsumed under and meaningfully compared within one coherent conceptual framework; in addition, not all of the experts named in the first paragraph would consider themselves 'esotericists'. In none of the recent studies mentioned above has there been any clarification of the meaning of 'esotericism' from a definitional standpoint, once the Western cultural context has been set aside in favor of a global perspective – that is, if Western esotericism is no longer taken as the conceptual starting point and standard of comparison, but instead provincialised. This is the precise aim of our project: to establish a global, contemporary study of esotericism within the framework of an interdisciplinary collaborative research project, which does not exclude processes of transfer and entangled history, but at the same time does not necessarily assume or require their presence.

On the other hand, we avoid the tendency found in the older debates to limit esotericism to ideas, dogmas or worldviews (cf. Crockford/Asprem 2018) and instead focus upon its practical, ritual dimension, including its material aspects (material culture, Morgan 2009). In doing so, we align

ourselves with the 'practical turn' in the social and cultural sciences (Schatzki 2006, Bongaerts 2008, Dickmann et al. 2015, Reckwitz 2016), as well as the concept of 'lived religion' (Hall 1997, Orsi 2002, McGuire 2008), subject to the proviso that some of the practices in question are more affined to 'religion' than others. The research on esotericism over the last decade has become increasingly conscious of its focus upon ideas, dogmas and worldviews, with a corresponding neglect of the performative dimension of esoteric practices (cf. Hanegraaff 2013, 102–18, who enumerates various desiderata in the field). The younger generation of scholars working on contemporary esotericism has taken up the practical turn and systematically introduced ethnological methodologies into their research on this topic (Granholm 2014, Asprem/Granholm 2014, Asprem 2017, Crockford/Asprem 2018, Cejvan 2018, Lycourinos 2018, Crockford 2021). In doing so, it became clear that esoteric practices cannot simply be interpreted as copies or transpositions of pre-existing worldviews "waiting to be decoded" (Cejvan 2018, 40). Instead, they form an independent realm of experience, in which the script is not merely followed, but in which spontaneous adaptations, creative innovations and new rationalisations can continuously unfold (Otto 2022). It is precisely within the realm of esotericism that the performative dimension becomes the more important one, whereas ideas, dogmas and worldviews may fluctuate continuously (cf. Luhrmann 1989 on this interpretative drift). This is related to the fact that esoteric practices generally possess an existential function, in that they create meaning and directly affect the perception of one's lifeworlds – in other words, through such practices, reality is not merely experienced, but created (cf. Kapferer 1997).

Different overarching concepts are used in present-day scholarship for the practices that we wish to investigate and compare from a transcultural perspective. English-speaking scholarship on esotericism commonly speaks of 'occultism' or 'occult practices' when the practical aspects of esotericism are emphasised (cf. Pasi 2006). In the field of anthropology, the prevalent concepts continue to be 'sorcery' (e.g., Kapferer 1997; Herriman 2009; Moro 2017) and 'witchcraft' (Geschiere 1997; Bubandt 2014; Kroesbergen-Kamps 2020). In history and the study of religion, the validity of the concept of magic has frequently been called into question, but nevertheless continues to be used by numerous scholars (Otto 2011; Otto/Stausberg 2013). As all of these concepts are problematic, due to their Eurocentric and polemical implications, we decided – inspired by the compromise term 'shamanisms' (Vajda 1999) – to use the plural expression 'esoteric practices' as the heuristic category of the KFG, on the grounds that it is less value-laden and more nuanced in its semantics. We employ the term 'esotericism' exclusively as an analytical second order category (Satlow 2005) – that is, as a default term that facilitates the identification of specific types of practices from a transcultural perspective, including their culturally-specific discourses of rationality, thus allowing for systematic comparison. In other words, our point of departure for comparison is not a historical prototype with diffuse instantiations ('Western esotericism'), yet at the same time we do not postulate 'esotericism' as a universal 'phenomenon' that, with various contextually different manifestations in different locations, always retains the same 'essence' (for a critique of such 'essentialist' research on esotericism see Okropiridze 2021). Instead, the KFG will be oriented around an etic working definition with four transparent criteria that may be continually modified during the course of research, in an open exchange of results with research partners and practitioners from multiple cultural environments. It is only such an abstract working definition – a definition uninformed by a historical model – and the collaborative methodology associated therewith that makes it possible to investigate esoteric practices from a truly global perspective and disengage from a Eurocentric 'imperialism of categories'.

A central point of departure for our consideration of the subject is the fact that practices focused on predicting, manipulating and controlling contingent life events are contextualised and evaluated very differently, depending on the region where they are located – in contemporary West Africa, in rural or urban regions of China and India, in parts of Southeast Asia, and even in Brazil, their status is by no means marginal but instead widespread and their claims to validity less open to question (on Brazil see Cantor Magnani 2019; on West Africa [Senegal und Gambia] Graw 2012; on China Lackner 2011; Homola 2017; on India see Nehring 2008a; Guenzi 2013; on Southeast Asia [Brunei] Müller 2018a, [Indonesia] Schlehe 2015, [Vietnam] Hüwelmeier 2019). Thus the 'rejected knowledge' narrative claimed for Western esotericism cannot simply be applied from a global perspective. In recent research, a change of perspective has, therefore, been suggested in social sciences and cultural studies, encapsulated by the terms 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2002) or even 'multiple secularities' (Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2015). In view of this, while analysing esoteric practices, we likewise proceed on the basis of a global multiplicity of socio-cultural positionings and contextualisations, which become obscured when adopting a unitary Western "rationalistic modern age" worldview. Whether the 'rejected-knowledge' narrative only reflects Western or Europeanist dynamics of marginalisation and devaluation of esoteric ideas and practices, or whether it can also be applied with different nuances in non-Western (e.g., Asian) contexts, is a question that needs to be put to the test. A good example that requires a more nuanced interpretation is knowledge about the 'art of numerology' in traditional China. Although it was referred to by official scholars as the 'smaller path', it was certainly not denigrated in terms of its efficacy or social relevance (Lackner 2015; Lackner 2017b). Even today, this art remains, in certain forms, connected with ritually-connoted apotropaic practices, such as the construction of talismans or purificatory rituals.

At the same time, given the global presence and influence of scientific and technological discourses, one of the working hypotheses of the KFG is that a fundamental tension is inherent within twenty-first century esoteric practices. This tension arises from the fact that, independently of their precise location, practitioners are usually aware of and have come to terms with the cultural dominance of scientific and technical rationalities. This can lead to dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (as well the strategic concealment of their praxis), but can also result in processes of creative adaptation, rationalisation and legitimation. Examples of such strategies include the use of 'scientific' vocabulary for the reinterpretation and revaluation of practices (e.g., Hammer 2004, Lackner 2011, Doostdar 2018), or the globally-attested adoption of new technologies, such as online rituals or mobile apps (Helland 2012, 2015; Nehring 2019b; Hock 2020). In the twenty-first century, secular and esoteric discourses coexist in many ways and places (in the sense of multiple situated rationalities – see below), mutually influence each other, and continually give rise to hybrid practices and identities (some examples: for the 20th century, Asprem 2014a; Josephson-Storm 2017; for the contemporary world, Berger et al. 2013; for an attempted academic legitimation of traditional Chinese practices, see Lackner 2011; for the hybridisation of Islamic orthodox, esoteric and academic symbolic languages of exorcism in Brunei, see Müller 2018a, 2021; on the Russian tradition of 'scientific' esoteric techno-futurism, see Young 2012; on the contemporary political and technological adaptation of spirit-writing in Vietnam, see Hüwelmeier 2019). Whether, and if so to what degree, practitioners succeed in absorbing, concealing or resolving the tensions and contradictions underlying such hybridisations remains an empirically open question, and likewise falls within the scope of the KFG.

If we take the contemporary scientific and technological discourse as a global foil and source of friction in regard to such precarious practices and alternative forms of rationality (on the concept of precarious knowledge, cf. Mulsow 2012), the concept of esotericism can be analytically refined and thus opened up to transcultural comparative research. By doing so, a polythetic working definition of esoteric practices can be developed which, for the KFG, will primarily serve as a heuristic category for the collection of material and which, in the course of research, may be refined through further criteria. As 'esoteric', we classify practices that: (1) have as their goal the ability to identify and influence present and future life events; (2) assume special knowledge, prolonged education and/or special abilities, features that typically lead to the formation of specialisation and expertism, which includes of strategies of secrecy and concealment; (3) are based on forms of ritual efficacy, which are generally concealed ('causally opaque': Sørensen 2013), and so cannot – or only partially – be apprehended by the senses; and for that reason (4) are contested and precarious, to different degrees in different culturally- and milieu-specific circumstances, since there is – especially in the twenty-first century – no unquestioned or generally accepted explanatory model for the effects ascribed to such practices. This final aspect allows us to investigate the very different and context-dependent demarcations between esoteric practices and the established or orthodox forms of religious practice in a given cultural setting. It is also central to our understanding of these practices against the background of the penetration and pervasiveness of modern technologies and scientific rationalities. Resultant dynamics of reciprocal influence, adaptation, assimilation, hybridisation and inclusion/exclusion form an important component of our research horizon. Under esoteric practices, we understand both those practices that are, in a narrower sense, affiliated with religious activity (esp. ritual practices; here there are multiple overlaps with the area of 'popular' or 'instrumental' religion), as well as those that are not necessarily connected with religion (e.g., horoscopy and other forms of divination, numerological practices, the mnemonic traditions of experts, as well as certain forms of amulet production). Our contemporary perspective also requires a consideration of dynamics of popularisation, commercialisation, and the multimedia proliferation of esoteric practices ('occulture': Partridge 2004; Carrette & King 2004), as well as their potential for social and political transformation (Kapferer 1997). The latter aspect has consequences for the transmission of the praxis-knowledge, as it involves dialectic tensions between stratregic secrecy and partial revelation – that is, between 'esoterisation' and 'exoterisation' (on the motif of strategic concealment or revelation, cf. Urban 1998; Piraino 2019). These tensions are further intensified by new media, technologies, and the scientisation of the -cultural spheres, which goes hand in hand with a growing need for evidence, verification and, for example, the digital visualisation of efficacy (Müller 2018a). The deployment of such strategies by practitioners can stand in a productively contradictory relation to the principle of esoteric concealment. Since the practices that we will investigate stand today not only in tension with religious orthodoxies and scientific rationalities, but also with different political regimes and ideologies (Lackner 2011, Müller 2018a+b+c), we also take into account the influence of the political conditions on the reconfigurations of esoteric practices and experiences, as well as the political-ideological instrumentalisation of esoteric practices and ideas within modern fascism (e.g., Julius Evola), neo-Satanism, or the realm of so-called 'magic warfare' (Wlodarczyk 2009).

Our analytical focus will be on esoteric experts and specialists. These are individuals who have commonly undergone a process of training and/or initiation, who regularly engage in their practice and who are, in our view, subject to an increasing need to justify themselves, given the pressure exerted by contemporary scientific and technological discourses. This focus will enable the

project to undertake a systematic comparison of a large number of practitioners. Whilst proceeding from a global (*not*: universal) type of 'esoteric practices' as an analytical starting point, the project will allow for a high degree of variability at the level of concrete examples.

The KFG is oriented towards sociological theories of praxis – that is, the general concept of praxis or praxis-knowledge – and so does not restrict itself exclusively to the idea of ritual. Processes of ritualisation (i.e., the formal consolidation of practices through repetition [Schäfer 2016]; the establishment of texts as well as their transmission) naturally play an important role in the realm of esoteric practices. The studies of the *Sonderforschungsbereich* on ritual dynamics in Heidelberg (Michaels et al. 2010–11; Brosius et al. 2013) as well as the recent theoretical approaches in ritual studies (Kreinath et al. 2006; Grimes 2013) have demonstrated that it is all but impossible to formulate a unified theory of ritual that could be applied in an interdisciplinary and comparative manner to such an extensive research field. The concept of praxis is hence more open and better suited to the objects of our research: practices are, in themselves, distinct from rituals and, through shifts in both time and space, are differentiated from other practices (Schäfer 2016, 140; Walthert 2019). Practices are embedded in the world around them and bear the stamp of their socio-cultural environment, yet retain the momentum of spontaneity – they can have an experimental character and react flexibly to changing contexts; they do not necessarily stick to a single script. While this dynamic tendency has also been duly noted in recent ritual studies, it is one of the most crucial aspects for the KFG, given the global-contemporary perspective adopted and the rapidly changing world of today. For this reason, we distance ourselves from performance theories, which understand social events merely as refractions of previously-formed or available templates, plans or ideas (cf. Bongaerts 2008). Esoteric practices can indeed have a stabilising, routine character (Giddens 1995) and, at times, correspond to the habitual behavior enunciated by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1990/1980; Lenger et al. 2013). Yet, at the same time, they are enmeshed in changing socio-cultural contexts, they are situational and so highly dynamic: we view this as a fundamental component in explaining their resilience in the 20th and 21st centuries. As such, the KFG will not lay its focus on the intercultural comparison of the performative structure of esoteric rituals, but rather on the different socio-cultural positionings and transformative processes of esoteric practices, while paying attention to the methods, traditions and strategies of ritualisation (cf. Bell 1992).

When we speak of alternative rationalities, we use the concepts 'rationality' and 'rational' in a purely predicative sense and dissociate ourselves from reifications of rationality and the idea of a universal 'objectivity' of reason. Instead, we understand rationality as a meaningful capacity for reflection (cf. Schnädelbach 1984), which brings people into play as active participants in context-dependent and situationally different ways. Rationality implies the ability to follow rules, to have them at one's disposal, or to create them (Chomsky 1969). Important, too, for our field of research, ever since the foundational works of B. Malinowksi (Malinowski 1935, 1948), is the aspect of instrumental or economic rationality, the ability to formulate a coherent relationship between goals and means within the epistemic boundaries available in a given cultural context (Kolakowski 1990). In understanding rationality as a predicate or competence, we shift the analytical focus from the specification of unitary or 'universal' criteria for rationality to the question of how people in specific sociocultural contexts and situations model and interpret their thoughts and actions as 'rational' and coherent, within the horizons of their own values and beliefs.

The quality of being rational, and so having access to a broad range of structured actions, can be ascribed to persons, actions, ideas and even entire social systems. This ascription of rationality is of particular importance for our field of research: the rationality debate in

anthropology in the 1960s and 70s (Wilson 1970; Horton/Finnegan 1973; Dürr 1981a+b; Evans-Pritchard [1937] on "Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic" among the south-Sudanese Azande was pioneering) has demonstrated that the postulate of a 'universal' human rationality, which can be used to compare and evaluate belief systems and practices from different cultures, is fundamentally flawed (cf. Shweder 1986; Kippenberg/Luchesi 1987; Otto 2011; Hammer 2019; on divination, see Vernant 1974). The ascription or denial of rationality in the ethnological analysis of ritual (on the problem of immunity to falsification, cf. Tambiah 1973) was criticised as a Eurocentric praxis, which hindered attempts to 'understand the other'. The question of whether a universal reason exists or, rather, multiple culturally-specific rationalities was raised anew in the 1980s in the wake of the writing culture debate (Clifford/Marcus 1986) and in the 1990s by a debate sparked by M. Sahlins and G. Obeyesekere over the journals of James Cook (overview: Borofsky 1997), and resulted in various positionings and terminological innovations, including multiple rationalities (Shweder 1986), beyond or outside all rationalities (Kapferer 2003), and multiple situated rationalities (McGrath 2019).

The KFG will take up the essential implications of these debates: we will proceed on the basis that rationalities are culturally-variable and that only within their specific socio-cultural context or milieu can they have, or there meaningfully be ascribed to them, any kind of validity. That being said, we do not question the potentially unifying competence of rationality for the idea of humanity (cf. Agassi/Jarvie 1987). We even consider this competence as a fundamental condition for undertaking comparative and cross-cultural academic research geared towards understanding and enhancing knowledge. In this respect, we also distance ourselves from comparative studies whose core interest is to demonstrate radical difference (for a critique on this, see Renn 2005; for the longstanding ethnological unease about the cross-cultural comparison of case studies, see Schnegg 2014; cf. also Candea 2018, 7, who notes that comparison has been viewed as "deeply suspicious" for four decades; he also offers a general overview of ethnological comparison). What we are interested in is the dynamic relationship between different cultural- and milieu-specific rationalities, the ascription or denial of rationality – for the valorisation or devaluation of ideas, practices, individuals or groups – as well as the production of alternative rationalities through a process that we, inspired by the ethnologist of religions A. Doostdar (2018), designate as rationalisation. From a praxeological perspective, the process of rationalisation is central to the investigation of esoteric practices, since it functions as a conduit between ideas and actions, between theory and praxis. The question of what counts as rational, or who is entrusted with the authority to determine the rationality of a statement or action, is context-specific, often contested, and can undergo permanent change, so that even rationalisations only make 'sense' in specific constellations of a socially-negotiated power to classify.

'Alternative rationalities' are, for us, products of just such processes of rationalisation. They are 'alternative' in the sense that they seek to rationalise practices that, from the perspective of the more dominant global scientific and technological discourses, must be viewed as 'irrational'. Since at least the nineteenth century, a scientific-technical conception of rationality, which first became dominant in European contexts, was received and critically adapted transregionally or globally due to colonial expansion (cf. Sivasundaram 2010; Fan 2012; Prakash 1999; Raj 2007; Nehring et al. 2010). This process inevitably led to 'glocal' (Robertson 1998; Roudometof 2016 offers a more recent discussion of the concept; for anthropology cf., e.g., Salazar 2005) tensions with those practices and ideas that were based upon alternative forms of rationality. It is in the light of these tensions that we need to ask the question of whether and to what extent did specific practices only became

'esoteric' in reaction to the import of a Western, scientific-technical understanding of rationality (e.g., through the ongoing questioning of their ritual efficacy, or their retreat into privacy or secrecy). Despite its contemporary orientation, the KFG, therefore, also includes within its scope historical perspectives and projects, especially those of entangled history and transfer history. On the other hand, we intend to investigate the extent to which the esoteric specialists themselves perceive their praxis as 'alternative', even if by means of rationalisation they may feel the need to reduce or resolve the perceived discrepancy with scientific-technical rationalities (vgl. Doostdar 2018, Müller 2018a). The assumption of this kind of tension is, therefore, essential for the research agenda and ongoing work of the KFG: it ultimately defines the working definition of 'esoteric practices' stated above, our understanding of 'alternative rationalities', and the fundamental questions and goals of our research. Yet it remains a working hypothesis, subject to empirical testing, and our analysis remains open and unbiased, in the sense that we are prepared to encounter different intensities of this glocal tension – different hybridisations or hybrid-rationalities (a complicity between esoteric practices and branches of science), the development of hierarchies (where one rationality is perceived to be of higher value than another, although validity is ascribed to both), the mobilisation of rationalities against each other, and even the marginalisation or outright rejection of claims of rationality. A useful analytical tool for this is Benda-Beckmann's (2002, 38ff.) differentiation between several modalities that actors can deploy to integrate the coexisting normativities with flexibility and with due regard to the specifics of their own situation. Can we observe – and if so when – these or other kinds of strategies in the practitioners working in our field of research in terms of how they position themselves between esoteric registers and scientific and technological discourses? These questions will form part of the research horizon of the KFG.

The work of the KFG will mainly consist of an analogic-synchronic comparison of contemporary examples of esoteric practices and practitioners (on analogic-synchronic comparison, cf. Asprem 2014b, 20–24). In some instances, these will be geographically as well as historically unrelated, while connected in others. Against this background, there has, in recent decades, been a multifaceted, interdisciplinary critique of the comparative study of cultures and religions (on the problematics of essentialism, decontextualisation, dehistoricisation, or the general lack of transparency in the selection of data, cf. Freidenreich 2004; Stausberg 2011; Sakai 2013). This has resulted in an almost complete absence of transcultural comparative analyses, especially within the framework of a collaborative research project. The KFG categorically dissociates itself from this trend. We instead look towards the successful deployment of comparative analyses in recent scholarship (Freiberger 2009; Shushan 2009; Rondolino 2017) as well as the more constructive debates that have arisen during the last decade on the comparative approach in anthropology and the study of religions (Nehring 2011, 2015b; Pirie 2013; Schmidt-Leukel/Nehring 2016; Hughes 2017; Lincoln 2018; Candea 2018; Freiberger 2018; 2019). While paying due regard to the shortcomings of older comparative studies, we intend to adopt solutions that, on the one hand, emphasise the unavoidability of comparison (for religious studies, see Patton 2000; Segal 2001, 2006; Jensen 2004; anthropology: Pirie 2014; Candea 2018) while, on the other, have attempted to structure the comparative process in such a way as to enable the best chance of overcoming the drawbacks characteristic of older comparative research (Flood 1999; Murphy 2010; Nehring 2016, Freiberger 2018, 2019). Relying upon these constructive approaches, we have developed our own operationalisable position, which will be set out in detail in the program of research (cf. 2.1 below).

Despite the vast global presence and relevance of esoteric practices, to date, no comparative research group has been formed to investigate the topic on an international scale. In recent decades,

there have only been regionally-specific studies on isolated practices and practitioners (e.g., Walker 1990, Gellner 1992; Kapferer 1997; Geschiere 1997; Haron Daud 2001; Palmié 2002; Romberg 2003; Sündermann 2005; Sarrazin 2008; Engler 2012; Schlehe 2014; Granholm 2014; Lackner 2017a+2018; Oliveira & Boin 2018; Hüwelmeier 2019; Fjelstad and Hien 2011 offer a transcultural case-study between Vietnam and California, Capponi 2018 between Brazil and Italy). As a consequence, we cannot refer to a synthetic overview of the state of research in a narrow sense. Taking the goals of the KFG set out above – (1) to open up the global field of such practices at a transcultural level; (2) to compare practitioners and their strategies of interpretation, rationalisation and legitimation; and (3) to develop a theoretical explanatory model for the resilience of such practices in the face of the globally influential scientific and technological discourses – the KFG plans to break new ground, both nationally and internationally.

To date, there has been no typological study of esoteric practices from a global perspective, and no explanatory model of global scope has been developed that accounts for the continuing persistence, resilience and reinvention of these practices. Moreover, the question as to why esoteric practices are marginalised and stigmatised in certain contexts, while in others accepted and, at times, even institutionalised, has not been investigated through the lens of an interdisciplinary and transculturally-oriented research project. Six aspects within the academic literature may be identified, however, which affect the relationship between esoteric practices and modernity, and which, as hypotheses, will be taken into consideration by the KFG: (1) the debate on magic in modernity (e.g., Geschiere 1997; Comaroff/Comaroff 1999; Meyer/Pels 2003; Bever/Styers 2017; Moeran/de Waal Malefyt 2018) has demonstrated that esoteric practices in the 20th and 21st centuries have not simply 'lived on' as cultural relicts, but display an extraordinary capacity for resistance, adaptation and transformation. The modern age has helped to produce innovative esoteric practices and specifically modern rationalisations – a good example being the 'psychologisation' of Western ritual magic in the 20th century (Hanegraaff 2003; Asprem 2008; Plaisance 2014); (2) in the course of the 20th century, especially since the 1960s, esoteric practices have made increasing inroads into popular culture (Hanegraaff 1996; Knoblauch 2009; Nehring/Ernst 2013), albeit to different levels of intensity in different parts of the globe; this blending of popular culture and esotericism ('occulture': Partridge 2004) has led to a greater reach and acceptance of esoteric practices, as well as new hybridisations and potential for innovations; (3) the strategies of rationalisation and legitimisation adopted by esoteric practitioners in the 20th century have often oriented themselves around scientific discourses, visible for instance in the adaptation of scientific vocabulary to enhance the plausibility of their praxis (Hammer 2004; Lackner 2011; Müller 2018a; Nehring 2021); (4) recent practices are, at times, decidedly affine to technology, and practitioners frequently change their form and performance (or 'staging') by means of new communication technologies, such as mobile apps and other instruments (on digital religion in general, see Campbell 2012; there are countless examples of what we coin as 'E[lectronic]-Esotericism': e.g., apps for practical Kabbalah in Israel, Fengshui-apps in Taiwan, online-exorcisms in Southeast Asia; for Nigeria, see Hock 2020; for Indonesia, Schlehe 2015, 6, who notes that many so-called 'paranormal' specialists offer profitable online services; for electronic devices in New Age astrology in the USA, see Crockford 2018; for technologised spirit mediumship in Morocco, see Spadola 2014; for the connection between the media and shamanic performance of authenticity in Korea, see Kendall 2014; for the influence of televisual imaginaries on ritual performances in Brazilian Candomblé, see van de Port 2006); (5) the increasing cultural transfer of esoteric practices and ideas since the 19th century has not only intensified their hybridity but also strengthened their resilience – they

continue to live on even through emigrations (for the survival of the premodern German 'Brauchbuch' tradition in contemporary Brazil, see Klein-Käfer 2015; for intensified Vietnamese techniques of possession in exile, see Hoskins 2015); (6) in religious studies, the debate about the resilience and popularity of 'Western esotericism' has also alluded to the framework of a potential 're-enchanment' or 're-sacralisation' of the modern world (Knoblauch 2009; Sutcliffe/Gilhus 2013; Blonner 2019). This last thesis cannot be retained from a global perspective: in less secularised regions, such as certain African countries (for Tanzania, cf. Schnoebelen 2009; Wilkens 2017), the analytical starting point is, rather, one of continuity or a continuous re-making of local practices. Any explanation of the issue of resilience must, therefore, be culture- and context-dependent.

1.1.1 Institutional preliminary work

Directed by Lackner, the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities 'Fate, Freedom and Prognostication: Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe' (hereafter IKGF: Internationales Kolleg für Geisteswissenschaftliche Forschung) at the Friedrich Alexander University at Erlangen-Nürnberg (hereafter FAU) is one of ten Käte Hamburger Kollegs currently funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF: *Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung*). Its aim is to develop cutting-edge research in the humanities, foster networks and strengthen interdisciplinarity. Since its formation in 2009, the IKGF has developed into a world-leading research center on divination and prognostication, in which emphasis is laid on interdisciplinary research between East Asian Studies (particularly Sinology) and the history of medieval and early modern Europe. Over the last decade, the IKGF has accommodated over 160 fellows from various disciplines (including Classics and Ancient History, American Studies, African Studies, Byzantine Studies, Anthropology, Indology, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, History of Medicine, Studies in Religion, Philosophy and Sociology), and in so doing has made a fundamental contribution to the interdisciplinary research on prognostication. The KFG will be integrated institutionally with this preliminary work, utilising its premises, infrastructure and channels of publication, as well as in terms of content: over an 11-year period, the IKGF organised more than 65 conferences and workshops, many of which were thematically relevant to the KFG. Research associates and visiting scholars of the IKGF wrote more than 380 monographs and articles. The IKGF produced over 300 videos (events, interviews, teaching material), and created a bibliography containing 11,000 concise entries, which is frequently used today by academics around the globe, and founded a special book series (Prognostication in History Series) and a peer-reviewed journal (International Journal of Divination and Prognostication) with Brill. Evaluations by the BMBF and the university have repeatedly drawn attention to the 'immense productivity', consistent interdisciplinarity, methodological innovations and international range of the IKGF, which even exceeded the expectations set out in the funding model. The IKGF was pioneering in setting up an innovative field of research on prognostication and divination: Sinologists and scholars of other disciplines related to Asia worked together with historians of Europe to develop comparative and integrative analyses spanning different cultures and epochs. It also sparked research in esoteric practices in the Chinese-speaking World. With reference to the questions of the resilience of esoteric practices, the IKGF also concerned itself with the modern and contemporary Chinese-speaking world, where these are omnipresent, as in horoscopy, the production of apotropaic talismans, techniques for prolonging life, or spirit-writing. In this respect, also recent adaptations need to be mentioned, which have resulted in a certain degree of metamorphosis, as for instance in

the case of the influence of deep psychology or Western astrology in some Chinese horoscopy schools. Another example is the use of modern media – experts who explain magical formula (*zhou* 咒) for the protection of facemasks on Hong Kong television, or apps that make temple oracles available 'on demand' at any time. These preliminary studies of the IKGF have made an indispensable contribution to the research agenda of the KFG. In addition to Lackner's role as director, Nehring has also spent a year working with the IKGF, including the management of colloquia and other events.

B.-C. Otto has been involved with the IKGF as a Senior Research Fellow since 2019 and is one of the leading experts on Western esotericism and ritual magic in German scholarship. The KFG has been fortunate in securing his services as an academic Associate and coordinator of the project. He complements the Asia-oriented research of the applicants with his expertise in Western esotericism and, through his membership (since 2016) of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, will act as an important conduit between the project and scholarship on Western esotericism. He has produced groundbreaking works in religious studies on the history of the concept of magic (Otto 2011), the development of typology and theory (Otto/Stausberg 2013, Otto 2017), as well as the history of 'Western learned magic' (Otto 2016, Bellingradt/Otto 2017, Otto 2018a, 2018b, Otto/Heiduk 2020, Otto/Johannsen 2021), all of which are pertinent to how the KFG will frame its questions and methodology. In addition, he has worked on contemporary ritual magicians in Europe and North America for several years (Otto 2018, 2019, 2021). Through interviews and field work, he has managed to build up a considerable network of Western practitioners, which will be extremely valuable with regard to the comparative work of the KFG.

As a direct preliminary, the applicants, under the patronage of the IKGF, held a workshop (Jan. 2020) and international colloquium (Dec. 2020) on the topic of the planned KFG. For the workshop, three leading scholars were invited to visit Erlangen (Egil Asprem, Marco Pasi, Birgit Menzel) to attend a discussion of the concepts and methods, while the conference in December 2020 brought together eight academics who work on 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective': W. Hanegraaff, D. Gellner, Y. Harari, K. Graw, K. Hock, R. Romberg, K. Cantú and B. Menzel. The conference demonstrated that the working definition outlined above is eminently suitable for capturing and analysing esoteric practices in places such as contemporary Israel (Harari), Costa Rica (Romberg), Senegal (Graw) or Southern India (Cantú). Additionally, the comparative questionnaire (detailed below) to be used by the project will prove an exceptionally useful element, as it allows the comparison of esoteric practices across four dimensions (the conceptual, practical, social and cultural domains) with reference to both their similarities and differences.

1.1.2 Individual preliminary work

<u>M. Lackner</u> is Professor of Sinology at the FAU. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the theory and praxis of dream-interpretation in traditional China (Lackner 1985), followed by works on the transcultural aspects of Jesuit missionaries in China (Lackner 1986) and the esoteric interpretation of Confucian teachings by the philosopher Zhang Zai (Friedrich/Lackner/Reimann 1996). With Michael Werner, he wrote an essay on the cultural turn in the humanities (Lackner/Werner 1999). Further publications were dedicated to the topic of the transfer of knowledge between China and the West in the modern period (Lackner /Kurtz/Amelung 2001 und Lackner/Vittinghoff 2004). Since 2009, he has been the head of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg 'Fate, Freedom, and Prognostication: Strategies of Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe' and has published, in connection with the

thematic focus of the Kolleg, various works on questions of divination and coping with the future in the traditional, modern and contemporary Chinese-speaking world (Lackner 2011, 2015, 2016, 2017a+b, 2018, 2020, 2021 a+b). In the DFG-funded Graduiertenkolleg 'Cultural hermeneutics as sign of Difference and Transcendence', he oversaw a work on numerology in China in the 11th century CE.

A. Nehring is Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology. Since completing his doctorate on one of the new religions in Japan in the 20th century which emerged from an esoteric movement (Nehring 1992), he has concentrated on popular forms of religious practice in Buddhist and Hindu contexts, as well as mindfulness meditation in popular culture (Nehring 2006, 2008a, 2015; 2019a, 2020; Nehring/Ernst 2013). Additionally, he has published on miracles in the Hindu context, Western interpretations of folk-religious and esoteric practices in South India (Nehring 2003) and investigations of popular rituals in Theraveda contexts. Specific areas of focus are processes of modernisation in religious traditions within colonial contexts (Nehring 2003, 2008c, 2009, 2013a), the transfer of knowledge between India and Europe, the formation of postcolonial theory, and reflections on the comparative study of religions (Nehring 2005, 2008b, 2011, 2013b, 2015, 2019b; Nehring/Schmidt Leukel 2016). In the DFG-funded Graduiertenkolleg 'Cultural hermeneutics as sign of Difference and Transcendence', he oversaw a project on shamanism in Tyva and neo-gnosis in Russia.

D. Müller is Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology, and directs a graduate program and Emmy Noether group. His research is concerned with normative change in Muslim-influenced Southeast Asia in terms of political and legal anthropology (esp. Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore). Relevant to the KFG is his work on the micropolitics of the power of state classification in relation to Malaysian supernatural practices, the experts in which have been increasingly marginalised and criminalised (Müller 2015, 2017, 2018a+b). He has also studied hybrid positionings towards registers of state-sponsored Islam, science and technology, such as a 'sharia-conforming' exorcist center in Brunei, in which specialists re-legitimate themselves as 'Islamic healers', while at the same time having recourse to esoteric techniques from Japan (Müller 2018a). He has also conducted research on the measures taken to persecute and re-educate practitioners of esotericism, as well as the public exhibition of confiscated esoteric objects. He has been involved in several high-ranking research projects in Southeast Asia, North America and Europe. As another preliminary to the KFG, he has established contact with an academic at the University of Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) who is working on an esotericism-inspired project on the digital demonstration of sorcery and 'measurable' presence of spirits or 'aura' that can be manipulated by experts. The project has received research funding and media attention (New Straits Times 2020) and led to a publication (Kurniawan & Stark 2017). Further groundwork was laid through a co-organised workshop at Cambridge University in October 2019 on 'Politics and the Supernatural in Southeast Asia'.

2. Goals of the KFG and collaborative framework

2.1 Goals and academic concept

The KFG will pursue four, mutually-reinforcing research goals: (1) a wide-ranging exploration of the empirical foundations of this field of research; (2) a systematic comparison of esoteric practices from a global perspective, with a particular focus on practitioner strategies of interpretation,

rationalisation and legitimation; (3) the development of a nuanced typological language of analysis for the interdisciplinary and transcultural study of esoteric practices; and (4) the development of a multifactorial cultural theory of esoteric practices, which places particular emphasis on the question of their resilience.

(1) The **first goal** is to access empirically and explore the global field of esoteric practices as comprehensively as possible. We are aware of the fact that both the chosen research field and our comparative focus may appear unusual against the backdrop of the current debates and research strategies in area studies, anthropology or religious studies. On the one hand, the aforementioned critique of intercultural or inter-religious comparative studies has resulted in a fundamental questioning of comparative research, which is now only rarely conducted in a systematic manner. On the other hand, there has been a general tendency to deny any significance to the practices in question, partly due to established stereotypes within academia, with the consequence that examples such as the eight figures mentioned at the outset have mainly been studied only in isolation. Here, we place great confidence in the design of the format of the KFG and the potential synergies that it will generate: the fellowship program and inclusion of experts from a wide range of disciplines (African studies, anthropology, indology, Islamic studies, religious studies, philology, sinology, etc.), who work on esoteric practices/practitioners in various cultural and regional contexts, will enable numerous case studies to be subjected to a comparative endeavor, with extensive competence and depth of experience. Through our focus on collaborative comparative analyses and the formation of typologies and theories, new research horizons will open up which will, in turn, lead to analytical advances on the level of theory, method and topic, which the mere accumulation of isolated studies cannot achieve.

Due to our global and contemporary perspective, as well as the nature of the research topic, 'complete' coverage of the material will, naturally, be impossible. Through the selection of research associates and the fellowship program, however, we will, during each semester, aim to represent the broadest possible spectrum of regions and religious and sociocultural contexts. The background of the applicants is substantially geared towards Asia which, from the outset, will ensure that Eurocentric research perspectives are subjected to self-critical appraisal and avoided wherever possible. It is, however, also important to include research skills and evidence from African studies, Latin-American studies, Arabic/Iranian studies, Jewish studies, research on Western esotericism, and other disciplines. The plan is to fill two of the associate/coordinator positions with academics with experience of researching esoteric practices in African, Latin-American and/or Near Eastern or Eurasian contexts. Sustained engagement with African contexts is particularly important, given their potential to provide access to a number of oral traditions of esoteric practices. Latin America, too, is significant: as a region with an underlying Christian culture, but at the same time subject to Creole influence, it will repay close study. In respect to both the distribution and status of esoteric practices, both regions are entirely different from the Euro-American and Asian worlds, and for that reason will play a crucial role in embracing the global perspective that the project envisages. Western or Euro-American esoterism is amply covered through the appointment of B.-C. Otto. We will, in addition, work with a combination of regular and permanent fellows. The latter will spend three months per year on site at the KFG over the course of the entire funding periods. Permanent fellows (PF) will be appointed for four world regions which the research profile of the applicants and research associates cannot cover in sufficient depth: Africa, Latin America, the Near/Middle East and Eurasia (esp. Russia). Of the seven annual fellowships available, one will be reserved for

each of these (three-monthly) PFs. In contrast to regular fellowships, the PFs will not be advertised but filled with individuals who have been 'headhunted' and whose expertise is relevant to the four regions. This structure guarantees a broad geographical database in empirical terms, while methodologically it will ensure ongoing continuity in the processes of comparative analysis. The permanent fellows will accordingly assume an advisory role in the work of the management committee and be involved in the decision-making processes (e.g., the selection of regular fellows).

In each semester, the work will be based on five interlinked types of event: (1) a weekly colloquium will introduce the questions and methods of the KFG (including the matrix described below) through readings and discussion; (2) the applicants, research associates and fellows, together with external experts in attendance, will present case studies and research results at a series of weekly lectures; (3) at the end of each semester, a two-day comparative workshop will be held, which will systematically compare the case studies and research results. These comparative workshops have several goals: the refinement of the comparative matrix and the illumination of case studies through juxtaposition (for this methodological approach, see Freiberger 2018); the gradual development of a more nuanced language of typological analysis; and the formulation of explanatory models for a multifactorial cultural theory of esoteric practices; while the lecture series, colloquium and comparative workshop will be further supplemented by (4) an annual workshop involving external experts, and (5) an annual international conference.

The applicants and fellows aim to foster longstanding 'epistemic partnerships' (Marcus/Deeb 2011) of equals with local actors and practitioners (inspired by the principles of para-ethnography: Candea 2010). To this end, in specific cases, we intend, as far as logistically possible and pertinent in terms of content, to include practitioners as participants within the framework of the lecture series and individual workshops, in order to seek an exchange of views with them on the analyses, explanations and terminology developed by the research group. We hope, thereby, to destabilise the classic distinction between researchers and researched, and the models of thought and language that have become ingrained through habit in academic research on esoteric practices. Further opportunities for such an epistemic exchange between the partners will be created within the living environment of the practitioners during the field work, in collaboration with local research partners.

The research results arising out of the five key project formats will be published in an annual book series 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' (extensive preliminary discussions have been held with Brill). All KFG participants agree to describe their case studies or subject matter in accordance with a consistent narrative model (based on the matrix – see below). The case studies will be produced individually or in small teams (e.g., tandems) and printed in the series as well as made available digitally (open access). The volumes will consist of an introduction by the project directors, a section containing case studies, a section containing comparative papers produced collaboratively (see below), followed by a further section with typological and taxonomic analyses ('building blocks' – see below), as well as a concluding synthesis by the project directors. The format of the series thus transcends the mere conglomeration of isolated contributions and, instead, documents the comparative and collaborative processes of the project, in terms of both content and structure.

(2) The **second goal**, fundamental for our purposes, is to make use of the full potential of the format of the KFG for interdisciplinary and transcultural comparative analysis. The long-standing experience of the applicants with collaborative research projects has shown that, when setting up

a comparative research perspective in the humanities and social sciences, it is not enough simply to collect a group of academics from various disciplines in one place and hope that the presentation and discussion of research results will automatically generate comparative insights, or shared conclusions, or promote the transfer of knowledge between the participants. At least two further components are needed: (a) the initial setting up of a unified, widely-shared comparative methodology and terminology, which is (further) developed by all participants collectively and applied to their own case studies and fields of research; and (b) the formation of comparative teams within the given cohort of fellows at any time (at a minimum in pairs), with the aim of working towards common publications – a form of securing results that remains seldom practiced in cultural studies and the humanities. As such, we encourage the fellows to compose their case studies for the *Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective* book series in teams (e.g., through co-authored papers). We believe that drafting papers together, such as comparative descriptions of cases – even if felt to be unusual or challenging, especially when different disciplines come together – is precisely what leads to that creative synthesis and transfer of knowledge which a collaborative research project should strive to achieve.

The best way to achieve a meaningful, productive comparative analysis of the multifaceted material is to work with a unified methodology and terminology, which makes due allowance for the micro-, meso- and macro-levels (on the scale of comparison cf. Freiberger 2018, 14–15). The basis of our comparative work is, accordingly, the utilisation of a question matrix, which will be made available to all research associates and fellows as an analytical guide to the work of the Centre. This matrix currently comprises 30 questions covering four dimensions: (1) the conceptual dimension (including the basic concepts and terminology of the practitioners in their respective languages, their comparability and translatability, discourse and meta-discourse, broader discursive fields); (2) the practical dimension (concrete techniques and aims; descriptions of ritual efficacy, evaluation and optimalisation of practice, rationalisation and explanatory models, the relationship between tradition and innovation, ritual dynamics); (3) the social dimension (structural, spatial and demographic questions concerning location, age, class and gender; the power of symbolic orders; forms of instruction, schooling and institutionalisation; the social acceptance of practices; dynamics and strategies of exclusion and inclusion; exposure to stigmatisation and criminalisation; strategies to secure legitimation and plausibility); and (4) the cultural dimension (relationship to secularisation and scientific-technological rationalities; interaction with new media and technologies; relationship to wider dimensions such as religion, politics and economics; processes of intercultural exchange and transfer; hybridities). This comparative question matrix will be modified and adjusted throughout the course of the project in light of the case studies and results of the research. The comparative question matrix allows us – instead of introducing only a single *tertium comparationis* into the comparative analysis – to apply a significant number of specific questions from the four dimensions outlined above to the case studies of all participants in the KFG. This, in turn, will ensure an analysis of any given case study that is, in equal measure, consistent and, at the same time, multifactorial (for a similar approach in relation to 'religious individualisation', cf. Otto 2017; Fuchs et al. 2019). As opposed to older frameworks (such as the phenomenological approaches to religion), the matrix also enables comparative analyses on all three levels (micro, meso, macro). We have already put this framework to the test during the conference 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' (Dec 2020)', with successful results.

The comparative work of the KFG pursues several goals. Fundamental is the reciprocal illumination (Sharma 2005, Freiberger 2018; cf. also 'reciprocal comparisons', Austin 2007) of

examples through juxtaposition (cf. Freiberger 2018, 10), the specification of commonalities/differences by reference to the *tertium comparationis* (one of the items from the question matrix), and the ensuing nuanced description of the case study ('re-description', ibid.). Our comparative work also includes the constant testing, recalibration and – where necessary – expansion of the working definition of 'esoteric practices' outlined above, together with the comparative question matrix ('rectification', ibid. 10-11; cf. also Paden 2000), in response to the feedback, critique, and suggestions arising from a global-collaborative project. In doing so, we gain further self-awareness of the way in which academics who work from a comparative perspective are context-bound actors with their own goals and their own systems of classification, and we thus hope to make the participants in the KFG all the more conscious of the pitfalls associated with undertaking intercultural comparative research.

Finally, through the analysis of individual cases, we are also pursuing the goal of identifying patterns, and so the formation of models encompassing the results of multiple case studies (on the relevance of pattern-formation for cultural studies research, cf. Roepstorff et al. 2010). We anticipate the identification of such patterns in each of the four dimensions outlined above: in the conceptual dimension, this could include the valorisation or devaluation of specific practices/practitioners; in the practical dimension, similar models of performance ('ritemes': smaller ritual unities) or the ascription of ritual efficacy to invisible entities; in the social dimension, the strategic concealment and disclosure of elements of the praxis-knowledge; in the cultural dimension, certain dynamics of transfer, hybridities or utilisation of new forms of media. The identification of such patterns is a key value-add of the KFG format, since they can only emerge from systematic collaboration among the participants and the comparative analysis of an extensive range of case studies. Because the patterns to be identified refer to family resemblances between case studies from different geographical and socio-cultural contexts, they also enable the identification of distinctions or grades of variation (for an anthropological application of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance, see Pirie 2013; for the use in cultural theory of the concept of similarity found in difference theory, see Bhatti & Kimmich 2015). They enable a macroscopic view of the research field that is built on empirical insights (data-driven). The identification of these patterns is, therefore, the prerequisite for our development of a language of typological analysis (cf. 3) as well as a multifactorial global culture theory of esoteric practices (cf. 4).

The comparative work in the half-yearly workshops is designed to assist with the identification and discussion of these patterns, and the results will be captured in the book series 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective'. In addition to case studies authored by individuals or teams, the volumes will include a second section containing comparative papers, in which the participants record the results of their comparative analysis with reference to specific patterns identified in the course of studying multiple examples. Furthermore, the results of the comparative approach will dovetail with the conception of the annual workshop and conference, together with the associated publications. Finally, the results of the comparative work will contribute to the individual projects and publications of the applicants and local research associates.

(3) The **third goal** of the KFG is to develop a nuanced language of typological analysis for the transregional and transcultural investigation of esoteric practices. It is based on the identification of the patterns outlined above and intended to transpose these into a formalised second order language of analysis which will develop over time and continually expand. Our process is inspired by the 'building blocks' approach (Taves 2015) and its application to research on esotericism

(Asprem 2015), as well as by the 'patterns of magicity' model (Otto/Stausberg 2013, 10f). The underlying purpose of both approaches is to unpack and 'reverse-engineer' complex cultural concepts (Asprem 2015, 3), like 'magic', 'witchcraft', 'sorcery', 'occultism' and 'superstition', as analytical framework categories for the material under investigation and create a register of smaller semantic units ('building blocks'), by means of which the field of research can be portrayed in a more nuanced and culturally variable manner.

This register will be developed from the bottom up: the participants will be encouraged to develop these building blocks from their own case studies, especially during the comparative analyses in the comparative teams and comparative workshops described above. Apart from readings of the literature based on the building blocks approach and the patterns of magicity approach in the colloquium, only a few specifications for the concrete form of the building blocks will be given initially, since these should result synthetically from the comparative work. The KFG intends that, through its comparative work, a complex, hierarchical network or register of such building blocks will result from the material.

The development of such a formalised language of analysis is instrumental to our vision of exploiting the full potential of the research format of the KFG in terms of interdisciplinary and transcultural comparative analysis, since all of the participants will be working with a consistent methodology and terminology. Whereas the matrix is designed to encourage the participants to ask the same questions in relation to their material (methodology), the identification of the patterns and formation of building blocks are designed to help them develop a common language for describing their findings (terminology). Both strategies are instrumental in securing the ability to undertake the comparative analysis of culturally- and regionally-disparate case studies, thus enhancing the quality of that analysis. The development of this language of analysis represents a significant value-add of the project, since it can be used on an interdisciplinary and transcultural basis well beyond the confines of the KFG. It will also stimulate further theoretical reflections, since the identification of patterns over a great number of examples – i.e., of culturally varied but nevertheless similar (Schneider 1999; Renn 2005) terminological, practical, social or cultural strategies of action on the part of esoteric practitioners – requires explanations which transcend the analysis of isolated cases (in this respect, the collaboration with translation studies is of particular importance). Our comparative work, therefore, contributes to the formulation of an overarching, multifactorial cultural theory of esoteric practices.

The results of this incrementally-constructed typological language of analysis will be captured in the book series 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective'. Each annual volume will include, in addition to the case studies (Section 1) and results of the comparative analysis (Section 2), a third section, in which we will illustrate and explain the current status and degree of complexity of the language of analysis developed up to that point in time (Section 3: 'Building Blocks'). A continually updated version of this language of analysis will also be made available online (open access).

(4) As the **fourth goal**, the comparative work should ultimately feed into the ongoing formulation of a global, multifactorial cultural theory of esoteric practices, with particular emphasis on the question of their resilience. In developing this theory, we have no intention of retracing the same old explanatory models of the phenomenology of religion, or taking up the well-worn narrative of a dis- or re-enchantment with the world (alluding to the debates on secularisation and post-secularisation), nor yet do we postulate a putative inability of humans to advance beyond 'magical

thinking'. Even so, both the persistence of esoteric practices, as well as the existence of the patterns mentioned above or typological family resemblances over so great a number of regionally- and historically-unconnected case studies, demand an explanation. Why, despite all their local variations, do esoteric practitioners tend to gravitate towards similar strategies of ritualisation, rationalisation, justification or concealment of their praxis-knowledge? What are the individual, social and cultural determinants of these similarities? How, above all, are deviations and differences to be meaningfully explained? The KFG will also pay detailed attention to why, in certain contexts, esoteric practices have been and remain marginalised, whilst in others they are accepted and, at times, even institutionalised. This is a question which, to date, has not been investigated within the framework of a transcultural comparative research project.

The development of this multifactorial cultural theory of esoteric practices is primarily oriented around the differentiation of the four dimensions in the comparative question matrix outlined above. This differentiation makes it possible to take up theoretical models from various fields and disciplines – such as the cognitive study of religion and ritual (e.g., *conceptual integration*, Sørensen 2007; *predictive coding*, Asprem 2017; *attribution theory*, Taves/Asprem/Ihm 2018), but also from the fields of anthropology and sociology, and the study of deviance within religious studies, in addition to translation studies and entangled history – and to test these models with reference to the specific questions within the respective domains. The development of this necessarily multifactorial theorisation, which can here be given only in outline, will be the responsibility of the applicants and local research associates of the KFG. To assist its formulation, we have, in addition to the *comparative workshop*, planned an annual *theoretical workshop*, during which the applicants, research associates, selected fellows and external guests can view the results of the research and comparative analyses, incorporate theoretical developments into the project, and discuss explanatory models for specific observations or pattern formations. Whilst individual explanatory models arising out of this will be published in the book series 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' (Section 2: comparative analyses), during the second funding period, the applicants will be responsible for producing a more comprehensive narrative in the form of a co-authored monograph.

2.2 Organisation of the collaborative work and conceptual basis of the fellowship program

2.2.1 Organisational structure of the KFG

Three directors are responsible for the management of the Centre. During the first funding period, these are M. Lackner (Director), D. Müller (Deputy Director) and A. Nehring (Deputy Director), who will represent the Centre at any given time. The plan is for Lackner to transfer his previous position as Director of the Käte Hamburger College (IKGF) to Prof. Andrea Bréard. After the end of the cost-neutral extension of the IKGF in June 2023 and her Humbolt professorship (2024), Bréard will be embedded in the management of the College and, during the second funding phase (2026), will replace Lackner and Nehring in the Directorship of the KFG, in the role of vice-director, at which point Müller will assume the post of director. Bréard is highly respected for her wide-ranging studies on the history of Chinese ideas, politics, science and mathematics and their transregional entanglements. She was a visiting Fellow of the IKGF from 2011 to 2012 and will take over its management from Lackner until 2024, which will prepare her well for future management of the KFG by working at the confluence of themes related to the KFG. Lackner and Nehring will continue

to be active in the KFG after 2026 and play a leading role in defining its work, but by that point as Emeriti, without formal posts as directors. Since the research interests of the three applicants is geared towards Asia, the positions of the two research associates will be specifically filled with female scholars who are working on Africa, Latin America or the Near East and whose research is relevant to the project. Both research associates will be included on the management committee and in all important decision-making processes, just like the position held by B.-C. Otto. All three research associate positions are conceived primarily as academic positions, but will also involve independent coordination of the project and so provide support to the directors. This will include involvement in managing the organisation of colloquia/workshops/conferences; the publication process; the acquisition, selection and supervision of fellows; the management of the staff; event management; project reporting; and publicity work (esp. the website/blog). The goal is – by the second funding phase, at the latest – to include one of the two female research associates in the directorship of the KFG, if possible. The permanent fellows will be associated with the management committee during their stay and participate in its meetings. The committee will be supported by an administrative position (TV-L E9) for the managing directors, which will require a high degree of linguistic and intercultural competence, given the international outlook of the KFG, a secretarial position and a technical assistant. In addition, an international advisory board will be established. The advisory board will convene annually to evaluate the work of the KFG and provides advice on the further development of the KFG and fellowship program.

2.2.2 Conceptual basis of the fellowship program

Each year, up to six fellowships will be awarded, generally for international academics, who will be invited for sojourns lasting between three months and a year. The advertisements for these positions will already emphasise the central role of the comparative question matrix in providing a common framework for the KFG. Fellows will be expected to participate in one or more comparative teams. As outlined above, a further annual fellowship will be filled by invited permanent fellows, who will be on site for any three months of the year over the course of several years. They will participate in the work of the management committee, and their work will focus on the regions mentioned above (Africa, Latin America, Near/Middle East, Eurasia).

2.2.2.1 Selection criteria for the fellows

The fellowship program will recruit experienced (postdoctoral and above) international academics who have published on topics relevant to the project and who can demonstrate experience in and access to esoteric practices and practitioners in various geographical/cultural and linguistic contexts. In addition to advertising the positions, acclaimed academics in the field will be actively invited to apply. We will endeavor to maintain a balance between senior and junior fellows, and within cohorts of fellows at any one time. Given the global and comparative nature of the project, each semester will aim to include the widest possible sample of case studies in terms of geography, culture and religion. To this end, the management committee will make every effort to bring together into one cohort academics who work on different geographical contexts (such as Africa, Latin America, Eurasia, the Near/Middle East). We also plan to initiate collaborative projects within the cohorts that are both contemporary in their focus and methodologically informed by transfer history and entangled history. Suitable applications from Germany and FAU-members will be

considered. Gender equality and diversity both play a key role in the selection process. Positions will be advertised nationally and internationally on the KFG website, social media, and research portals, as well as being distributed through relevant institutes and associations. A two-stage selection process will ensure the quality and appropriateness of the case studies: the applications will be subjected to an initial preselection process, and selected applications will then be appraised by external reviewers and either accepted or declined by the management committee. Permanent fellows will be included in both the selection process and active recruitment of potential applicants. The length of the fellowships will be determined by the goals and scope of the project.

2.2.2.2 Incorporation of the fellows within the KFG

Within the framework of the KFG, we envision a balance between the time that the fellows spend on their own individual projects, and their inclusion in the programming and events of the KFG as a whole. Besides the selection of the projects and careful induction of the fellows by the directors and coordinators, regular participation in events is obligatory and essential for the success of the project. In addition, the Centre organises the colloquia and the workshops discussed above, during which the research associates and affiliated academics as well as fellows can discuss their projects and issues relating to their current research. A series of lectures will also be offered, which will be attended by research associates, affiliated academics and external experts as well as fellows. Each year, the fellows will participate in the workshops and international conference, as well as contributing to the book series 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' and the conference proceedings. They will also be asked to organise panels at international conferences in order to gain exposure to different subject areas, cultivate networks, and promote awareness of the KFG. The possibility of conducting small *ad hoc* workshops with KFG resources gives fellows the additional opportunity to become involved in the development of the Centre with their own thematic concerns. A weekly 'teatime', themed excursions and social activities will serve to foster team-building in a less formal environment. The integration of the KFG within the FAU, above all within the Faculty of Philosophy, will be supported through common workshops, panels, lecture series and seminars. Access to the events of the KFG will also be open to PhD and Masters' students (esp. from the thematically relevant elite study program 'Standards of Decision-Making Across Cultures' directed by Müller). All events will be conducted in English. Certain sessions of the different types of events will be hybrid in form (live events with Zoom participants, subsequently posted online) in order to reach an international audience and be promoted publicly as well as among the growing group of alumni, thus enabling former fellows to continue to participate in the work of the KFG.

2.2.2.3 Integration of fellows into the project documentation and publications

In addition to their contributions to the book series 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective', visiting academics, research associates and affiliated academics are expected to produce additional publications in high-ranking journals (preferably open-access, with support from the KFG), in conference proceedings or as peer-reviewed monographs. The initial volumes of 'Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective', to which all fellows will contribute detailed analyses of case studies and where possible general articles (on typology or methodology, for example), will appear annually from the outset during the first funding period. Lectures delivered by fellows as part of the lecture series will (subject to agreement) be made available via the KFG website and the FAU video portal.

An existing arrangement between the IKGF and the Institute for Media Studies will be used to produce videos on the work of the KFG. New fellows will also regularly be introduced in the newsletter, weblog, project brochures as well as the YouTube channel, with interviews, brief portraits, field reports, and other creative formats, to which they themselves can contribute.

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