



CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

CAS-E 2023 International Conference

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THE POLITICS OF AUTHENTICITY IN ESOTERIC PRACTICES



November 15 - 17



Conference Center
Forschungscampus
Waischenfeld, Germany

Link for virtual attendance:
<https://fau.zoom.us/j/63672581746>

NOV.15

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 17:00 – 18:00 | Welcome and
Introduction
Dr. Raquel Romberg |
| 18:30 – 19:30 | Keynote Lecture
Prof. Paul C. Johnson
(University of Michigan) |



Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg

Funded by



Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

THE POLITICS OF AUTHENTICITY IN ESOTERIC PRACTICES

The aspiration and claim to authenticity is also a claim to legitimacy and, in the realm of esoteric practices, to transcendental efficacy, defined at various macro and micro institutional and experiential levels. However, the criteria for modes of “authentication” are by no means uniform, ranging from religious, political ecological, national, ethnic, and so forth (Evans-Pritchard, D. 1987). In some cases, they derive from existing religious traditions, in others from nature, from science, and still in others, from shared spatio-temporal origins or encounters, embodied ritual continuities, new state policies, and changes of cultural traditions. Indeed, the authenticity of variously established, new, and revamped esoteric movements is not only authored but also authorized. In this conference, we aim at exploring questions of legitimacy, contestation, potency, efficacy, portability, presence, evidence, and performativity, especially focusing on the agendas and power relations that inform the various sources, strategies, and means of authentication of esoteric practices—new, old, and revamped.

Some of the questions are: how is the past of esoteric practices emplotted to fit the agendas, political realities, and moral demands of the present? Which aspects of the past of a people or practice are remembered (often nostalgically) as authentically significant for esoteric practices in the present, especially in light of re-locations of practitioners, and which aspects are (strategically) forgotten? Who are the actors directing these maneuvers? Where do they draw their authority and power from? Is it personal and/or institutional? What are the moral claims they make to inscribe and re-inscribe an “autochthonous” esoteric past or “an elsewhere” into a national, transnational, or supranational now and here? How do states incorporate previously delegitimized esoteric practices and practitioners into nationalist, multicultural, reformist, or pluralist agendas; what are the public discursive changes that foreground these moves? What are the narrativized and embodied times, sites, rituals, and sensuous markers that are claimed as “authentic” sources and resources of esoteric practices and its various technologies? How do new global communities of esoteric practices reconstitute their legitimacy and authenticity in light of the communication revolution and new challenges for transcendental presence, online initiation, and healing practices and rituals? Countering these expansive, consumerist, and competitive market-oriented processes, restrictive practices emerge as well to set ethnic, gender, and nationalist boundaries of “authentic” rituals and their audiences.

Since unpredictability and indeterminacy might characterize the presence of spirits in some esoteric practices, when, where, how, and by whom might such transcendental presence be recognized and deemed “authentic”?

Keynote Lecture

NOV. 15, 18:30 - 19:30

Prof. Paul C. Johnson (University of Michigan)

Charcot's Brazilian Monkey: Psychiatry, Religion, and the Authenticity of Automatism

The paper considers the religious authority of so-called automatism. I consider here the intersection of late-19th century French psychiatry and the birth of Brazilian psychiatry in the context of the emancipation of slaves and the perceived national health "crisis" of African religions in Brazil. Afro-Brazilian spirit possession rituals were classified, diagnosed and treated in the terms of French psychiatry, above all as automatism, dissociation, and hysteria. But it was not only discourses and diagnoses of psychiatric health that moved between Brazil and France. The famed neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot of the Salpêtrière became the personal physician and close friend of the Emperor of Brazil, Pedro II, and Charcot's prized capuchin monkey Rosalie was a gift from Brazil. Here I consider the relation posed between Monkey Rosalie and Charcot's prized patient, also named Rosalie. I leverage the case of the two Rosalies to critically evaluate the attraction to alleged animal and psychiatric automatism, and to reconsider the idea of religion as agency. Instead, the paper considers religion in terms of deferred, suspended or relinquished agency; less as the quest for agency than as the quest to be at least temporarily relieved of it, via the authenticity of automatism.

Panel 1 NOV. 16

9:00-11:00



Chair: Dr. Stefanie Burkhardt * Discussant: Dr. Knut Graw

“Embodied Nature as Source and Resource”

Nature, the environment, or more recently the planet, have become central players in local and global demands that are embodied in a host of ritual and affective practices. Their goal is often the recognition of the intangible cultural heritage of local, autochthonous esoteric practices that bind a people to a particular landscape, river, or mountain. Invoking their shared rights as members of "authentic" indigenous esoteric traditions, global forms of esoterically informed activism often advocate for national restitution of cultural and ecological rights, and in some cases for the recreation of these rights under the rubric of "deep ecology." Across spatial and temporal boundaries, old and new communities of esoteric practices form their commonalities based on shared embodied, sensory, and affective experiences via dispersed centers of initiation and expertise, as well as through the practices themselves, which are usually tied to a "primal" source of power and knowledge, in this case nature.

Dr. Anna Ozhiganova (CAS-E Visiting Fellow)

Re-inventing the “Natural Body”: Performative Practices of Russian Alternative Health Communities

The appeal to natural and supernatural powers, some of which are manifested in the human body and others hidden, is one of the essential features of esotericism, including its modern versions. According to performative theory, the reinvention of the (super)natural body through various esoteric or psychophysical techniques could be considered a special kind of embodied language serving spiritual self-transformation and the creation of "new men" and "new women" or "new spiritual people." The alternative health communities emerged in the 1970s and reached the peak of their popularity in the 1980s, when they constituted a noticeable and significant segment of the late Soviet "cultic milieu." Most of them continued to exist after the collapse of the Soviet Union, albeit in a modified form. They gathered followers of healthy lifestyle and spiritual self-transformation who

practiced cold strengthening in ice holes, yoga, breathing exercises, naturopathy, fasting, home waterbirths, and other psychophysical techniques. Most of these practices were inspired by the mystical teacher Porfiry Ivanov (1898-1983), who preached a spiritual healing system called Detka ("Baby"), and by the visionary and charismatic leader Igor Charkovsky (1936-2021), who founded the so-called Aquaculture project aimed at raising "baby dolphins" through waterbirths and intensive postnatal water training. Unlike many other Russian esoteric groups, which were highly intellectual and text-oriented, the alternative health communities produced almost no texts, instead relying on performativity - live practice, oral transmission of knowledge, and broad mediatization. Common performative practices included various types of public collective and individual actions and presentations demonstrating supernatural abilities, as well as their photo and video recordings, some of which were staged.

Dr. Ivan Tacey (University of Plymouth)

Dreaming with Forest Spirits and President Obama: Rethinking Indigenous Land Rights Claims Beyond 'Local' Traditions

In this paper, I draw upon case-studies collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Malaysia (2006-2019) to examine how Batek contemporary experiences of ecological destruction and socio-political violence are understood and reconfigured through esoteric practices (animistic, shamanic and myth-making practices). This leads me to discuss the potential of such activities as paths for gaining legal recognition of rights which encompass complexly entangled tangible cultural heritages (land rights) and intangible cultural heritages (shamanic and animistic practices). In Malaysian courts of law, recognition of indigenous peoples' rights are increasingly established through a community's ability to demonstrate their ongoing maintenance of traditional connections with the land claimed in accordance with customs distinctive to their particular community. Thus, such claims are dependent on notions of 'authentic' indigenous esoteric traditions which rely upon reified, static and highly localized representations of indigenous peoples' socio-cultural traditions. Through highlighting the dynamic and fundamentally interconnected nature of Batek esoteric practices that not only bind people to their traditional territories and potent local landscape features associated with powerful spirits, but also connect them to a plethora of far-away people and places, the paper aims to help rethink some of the complexities of esoterically informed restitution of the cultural, legal and ecological of indigenous peoples. The paper draws upon legal anthropology, Anthropocene studies, religious studies and the anthropology of the Otherwise, to rethink approaches to animism and shamanism and suggests avenues through which anthropologists can instigate collaborative approaches which facilitate indigenous peoples' claims to rights.

Dr. Anna Waldstein (University of Kent)

Embodying Jah Creation: The Powers of Nature in the Rastafari Movement

The global ecological crisis we currently face is the legacy of colonialism, mass enslavement and genocide of indigenous peoples, and the development of global industrial capitalism. It follows that many indigenous movements (especially those based on spiritual and/or esoteric knowledge) recognize the inextricable link between social and environmental justice. The Rastafari movement is perhaps best known for its commitment to reparations for the transatlantic slave trade (especially repatriation from the Americas to the African continent), its reggae music (and accompanying dreadlocks), and its recognition of cannabis as a spiritual sacrament. Less well known is their commitment to ecological restoration and protection of the natural environment. Central to the Rastafari way of life (livity) is a variety of spiritual practices designed to cultivate the health of people and their environment. Moreover, from the Rastafari perspective, Jah (the Creator and Source of all life in the universe) can be conceptualized as a divine energy that manifests in all living beings and can be embodied in human form through proper livity. Based on reasonings (ritualized discussions) with Rastafari brethren in the UK, as well as relevant literature, this paper explores in more detail how Jah('s) creation (i.e., nature) is embodied as a source of power and knowledge. It will consider how the Rastafari agricultural and nutritional system known as ital helps to build spiritual bodies with esoteric abilities. The paper will show how the ital way of life can lead to the ability of some Rastafari to remember past lives going back to the beginning of human life on earth, the ultimate source of spiritual authority.

Panel 2 NOV. 16

11:30-13:30



Chair: Dr. Maryam Abbasi * Discussant: PD Dr. Bernd-Christian Otto

"Margins, Circulations, and Boundaries"

This panel explores the workings of various discursive zones at the "margins," as those "zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability where contradictory discourses overlap, and where discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge" (Tsing 1994:279) within and beyond nation-states. It also explores such margins, which are the result of circulations and boundary makings. Esoteric practices and indigenous cosmologies have circulated and been adopted by different groups in distant places. In today's globalized world, such circulations in the realm of esoteric practices are enabled and encouraged by a cosmopolitan public eager to design their own modes to access the transcendental. In this process, they are open to ubiquitous consumerist marketing strategies and nationalist projects that commodify and redefine them in order to include various ethnic forms of spirituality. However, the "authenticity wars" over who has the right to control and manage such forms of knowledge and practice over geographical boundaries show that globalization as well as nationalist and indigenous cultural politics bring about not only connections but also new forms of boundary makings.

Prof. Dr. Ernst Halbmayer (Philipps-University Marburg)

The Margins of Indigenous Recognition and the Paradoxes of Pan-Indigenous Authentication: Examples from Colombia

The legitimacy of spiritual indigenous practices and cosmologies in Colombia is primarily a legal issue associated with the pluricultural recognition of indigenous groups and the specific rights associated with them based on the 1992 Constitution. I will ask about the limitations and resulting margins of indigenous recognition, especially with regard to indigenous cosmologies and related cosmo-political practices. At the same time empowering as disciplining and exclusionary, establish and transcend boundaries, giving rise to new circulations and new practices and enactments of indigeneity and indigenous spirituality. will focus on how, at the edges of ontological incompatibility, a new middle ground of cosmo-political practices and associated pan-Indigenous forms of authentication

has emerged, creating enactments and concepts that enter the public, political, and economic arenas. Such processes cross boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous parts of society and reach out globally and they increasingly transcend the boundaries of indigenous languages, cosmologies, and spiritualities themselves. Thus, these practices mark, visualize, and constitute a specific public indigenous middle ground that paradoxically obfuscates deeper cosmo-ontological practices and principles of individual indigenous groups. These practices thus stabilize a certain ontological blindness, while constituting a creative field of action in reacting, countering and making use of dominant societies' axioms and hegemonies in playful and strategic ways. Pan-indigenous and transnational indigenous practices, as less visible indigenous practices on the ground, simultaneously express indigenous spiritualities and cosmologies and the contexts of ongoing coloniality in which they are enacted and expressed.

PD Dr. Julian Strube (University of Vienna)

The “Esoteric Distinction” as a Claim to Authenticity and Authority: Case Studies from South and East Asia

Little attention has been paid to the function of a distinction between “esoteric” teachings and practices within cultural exchange and comparison. Using case studies from South and East Asia, ranging from Hindu Tantra and Daoism to Japanese Buddhism and Shinto, I will show how the “esoteric distinction” has functioned as a prominent mode of cultural interpretation since the sixteenth century. Rather than being a mere product of European, especially missionary, projection, the identification of teachings and practices as “esoteric” was shaped by local struggles for authenticity and authority, which in turn were enmeshed in exchanges between learned Europeans and Asians. Historically, these modes of interpretation have significantly conditioned and structured understandings of the “esoteric” in Europe and Asia. This aspect has received little attention in the study of esotericism, which has tended to focus on a “Western Esoteric Corpus” and subjects such as Freemasonry in the formation of the meaning of “esotericism.” A closer look at the globally entangled genealogy of “esotericism” is crucial for understanding more recent developments: In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial contexts, claims to “esoteric” knowledge functioned as important strategies of legitimation and even claims to superiority over European colonizers. From this perspective, meanings of teachings and practices as “esoteric” were at the center of prominent debates that were highly relevant to political, national, and religious identities. Taking full account of this circumstance has the potential not only to deepen our understanding of what “esoteric” might mean in specific contexts, but also to invite and facilitate transdisciplinary perspectives beyond the current boundaries of the study of esotericism.

Prof. Yuval Harari (Ben Gurion University)

The Hand, the Book, and the Words: Types of Charm-Therapists in Modern Israel

This presentation discusses the ways in which five different types of active charm-therapists (*metaplim bikhtivah*) in contemporary Israel understand their expertise and performative ability. It is the result of fieldwork conducted more than a decade ago among writers of magic plates (*tasa*) whom I followed and interviewed. While I was primarily interested in their practice at the beginning of the project, I soon realized that the most fascinating issue was their different perceptions regarding their power and success. In this presentation, I will briefly introduce some traditional charm therapists and their work, as well as the different explanations they give of their professional authority and power. Nissim Avisrur, for example, saw himself as a channel for celestial emanation; Shimon Cohen linked the efficacy of his actions to ancestral merit and the *baraka* that passes through his family; Shmuel Ma'uda relied on the personal providence of his late father as well as on special family books; Pinhas Amar tied his authority on a dream revelation from Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai (the alleged author of the Book of Zohar); and Israel Meir Almagor (author of a traditional recipe book, *The Book of Angel's Treasure*) relied solely on his written professional knowledge. The practices of all these (religious) practitioners are anchored in a long-lasting Jewish tradition of charm writing, and in this sense they are all "authentic" contemporary representatives of this tradition. The differences between them, however, reveal different shades on the spectrum between holiness and professionalism in relation to the agents of this kind of expertise, which were and still are typical of the Jewish discourse on magic.

Panel 3 NOV. 16

16:00-18:00



Chair: Prof. Dr. Birgit Menzel * Discussant: Dr. Lina Aschenbrenner

“Portability and Presence”

The material portability of proselytizing religions (Keane) in their various forms, from social media, the Internet, Facebook, and TikTok, has been adopted by mediatized queer and transnational spiritual communities where secrecy has been exchanged for open access and availability. The multiplicity and free market of centers and practitioners challenge any kind of orthodoxy and give free expression to heteroglossia and intertextuality (e.g. Latinix Queer Witches on the Internet and 'witchtok'). The most compelling cases are those in which new technologies of portability enable transcendental presence and ritual efficacy without the actual presence of devotees, augmenting rather than diminishing such mystical reconfigurations worldwide.

Dr. Giovanna Capponi (University of Roehampton)

Frictionless Religions? Portability and the Ecological and Digital Turns in Afro-Brazilian Religions

Afro-Brazilian religions, like Candomblé and Umbanda, have long been recognized for their complex materiality and the hierarchical structures that govern the transmission of ritual knowledge. This ongoing research explores recent developments indicating new trends in the portability of these religions, allowing them to spread locally and transnationally, and appeal to different audiences. These shifts revolve around two significant turning points. Firstly, an "ecological turn", wherein an increasing number of Afro-religious practitioners have taken proactive measures to abolish animal sacrifice and minimize the environmental impact of sacred offerings. The increasing attention towards environmentalist and animal welfare issues shapes new moral dimensions of the ritual practice, making it more attractive for urban middle classes and facilitating the formation of new transnational communities. Secondly, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted Afro-religious practitioners to explore innovative ways of conducting rituals and transmitting sacred knowledge within the digital realm. This “digital turn” has not only given rise to new spaces of religious engagement but also a restructuring of the dynamics of legitimation and power. Knowledge transmission no longer relies solely on secrecy and orality, but also on priests and priestesses with adequate skills to transmit spiritual energy and

presence within digital spaces. These trends open possible new ways in which “presence” can be administered and delivered through different materials, practices, and technologies. In doing so, they contribute to making Afro-Brazilian religions more “frictionless,” diluting moral conflicts and fostering their portability in new spaces and communities.

Dr. Liora Sarfati (Tel Aviv University)

European Korean Shamans and the Portability of National Heritage

The emerging phenomenon of non-Koreans being initiated as manshin (Korean shamans) has attracted attention within communities of practitioners. While the practice of musok (Korean shamanism) was legitimized as an important national heritage by the South Korean government, the practitioners have continued to be initiated through individualized apprenticeship. The vernacular nature of the practice has prevailed. When clients consult with manshin about sickness that involves unexpected acts such as running away to the mountains, bodily pains, and self-seclusion, they sometimes learn that this is a sign of a shamanic calling; the spirits are asking them to become possessed at will and initiated. In the past twenty years, such diagnosis has extended to include non-Koreans as part of the global spiritual market. The work of such healers and diviners has been mostly carried outside Korea. Some European manshin combine shamanic practices of various sources and origins into a unique amalgam. The common practice of travelling to Korea with clients for long rituals that the international initiates do not master has been substituted recently with simultaneous online rituals. With the increased usage of digitized communication, and the global pandemic of 2020-2 that prevented easy international travel, screen mediated rituals have often substituted on-site visits to musok shrines in Korea both for local venerators, and international ones. This shift in ritual site does not necessarily indicate an epistemic transformation. The non-Korean practitioners interviewed for this ethnography repeated the well-established cosmological perception of musok, and felt strongly connected to the Korean shamanic tradition.

Prof. Dr. Dorothea E. Schulz (University of Münster)

Materials and Vectors of “Spiritual Power”: Islamic Renewal and Social Media in Urban Mali

The paper examines the circulation and meanings of a particular “portable form” of social media that plays a key role in the religious engagements of followers of the charismatic Muslim preacher Sheikh Chérif Haidara in southern Mali. Since Haidara started preaching in the late 1980s, he has relied on audio and audiovisual media technologies to exhort his ever-growing following to moral reform of society and self. He has also become

a prominent leader of the transnational Fédération Ansar Dine, with followers in more than 15 countries in Africa, Europe, and the United States. In their various media and material engagements with their spiritual leader, these followers highlight that Haidara's special, "divinely granted powers" (baraka) is conveyed not only in his teachings but, importantly, in the force and quality of his voice. Various media and materials, such as clothes, audiovisual recordings, smartphones, and photographs, become channels for the mediation of Haidara's spiritual powers. I examine the significance of such "portable forms" for the emergence of Ansar Dine as an increasingly transnational religious community by tracing how his followers partake in his spiritual powers by circulating objects across national borders. Based on this material, I enter a plea for a wider understanding of "social media" that comprises various types of media and materials and create and sustain social ties among Haidara's followers. I also argue that these mediating materials are essential to the operation of religious movements and charismatic authority.

Panel 4 NOV. 17 9:00-11:00



Chair: Dr. Raquel Romberg * Discussant: Prof. Dr. Dominik Müller

"Spatiotemporal Origins Recovered and Remade"

In specific nationalist and global contexts, shared "chronotopes" or spatiotemporal convergences may serve groups that had been deterritorialized as a result of colonialism, slavery, imperialism, or the search for better opportunities to "recover" the common roots of their embodied esoteric practices. In that process, they "remake" themselves as diasporic transpacific or transnational communities of practice. In some cases, a unique place becomes a drawing force for various spiritual communities to remake their practices in the diaspora. In others, the dancing rhythms and movements of a distant yet meaningful place create embodied forms of communion and communities of practice.

Prof. Janet Alison Hoskins (University of Southern California)

Authenticating Spiritism in Vietnamese Caodai Communities: Homeland Repression and Diasporic Revelations

Caodaism is a syncretic new religion that arose during the period of French colonial rule in Vietnam through spirit writing. Its Supreme Being, the Jade Emperor, spoke directly to his followers in spirit séances, proclaiming that he was identical to Jehovah, the father of Jesus. The term Cao Đài, which means "highest tower," thus unites the East Asian pantheon with the Christian one and proclaims that "all religions have the same origin" – and includes with this announcement not only "the way of the Buddha" but also the "way of the immortals" (Taoism), "the way of the saints" (famous Vietnamese heroes as well as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), and the "ways of local spirits and ancestors" (Vietnamese folk religion and Confucianism). Since the communist victory in 1975, esoteric spirit writings have been banned in reunified Vietnam. While popular religion is on the rise throughout Vietnam, this form of "literary séances," sometimes referred to as "platforms for the immortals" (đàn tiên), remains restricted, especially in South Vietnam, where its practice was once associated with an independentist nationalism that alienated the Communist Party. One response to these restrictions has been the establishment of new spirit writing centers in the diaspora (especially in California) and the circulation of new spirit messages on the Internet, which are sometimes censored but seem to frequently reach audiences in Vietnam. Are these diasporic spirit messages authentic? Although not sanctioned by the central Tay Ninh "mother church", they circulate among Caodaists of other denominations and present a new and controversial form of religious inspiration for a globalizing faith.

Dr. Clara Saraiva (University of Lisbon)

A Magical Space, An Enchanted Temporality: Esoteric Practices, Legitimacy and Authenticity in the Sintra Mountain

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995, Sintra or Moon Hill is located in Cape Roca and is reputed for its special energy and use as a religious site over the centuries. Currently, it is used by numerous New Age religions for their ceremonies, offerings and rituals because of its believed sacred, magical power. Neo-shamans organize hour-long night walks on its unknown and dark trails to meditate and hug trees; Neo-druids perform rituals in praise of nature; Neo-pagans worship Mother Gaia; Afro-Brazilian religions perform their offerings to the Orixás in the forests or by the lagoons. This would not have been possible before the 1974 revolution and

the influx of migrants in the 1980s and 1990s, who brought with them various new spiritual practices, and the legitimization provided by Portugal's 2004 Religious Freedom Act. By combining the revival of ancient traditions that echo aspects of Portuguese colonialism and Portugal's relations with Brazil with the multi-layered authenticity of the site, devotees draw on ancient legends about the origins of Sintra to reinforce their legitimacy and empowerment. At the same time, they relate the multiple temporal layers in the history of Sintra to the multiple temporal layers in the histories of their religions. Moreover, all these spiritual practitioners claim their affiliation with transnational religious communities (such as the Pagan Federation International, Theosophy and Eubiose movements, the Afro-Brazilian traditions, etc.) that find their common ground and roots in the esoteric spaces and symbolism of Sintra.

Prof. Ann R. David (University of Roehampton, London)

Re-Territorialization through Bodily Practices: The Making of Diasporas through Movement (Dance), Ritual and Spatiotemporal Convergences

This paper examines the especially significant role of the human body and its movements in dance and ritual practices, taking an anthropological approach to the nuances of embodiment. Reflecting on over 25 years of fieldwork and research with moving bodies in religious communities in India, Bhutan, and diasporic communities in the UK, I argue that by investigating human movement systems that include ritual and dance practices, through an embodied understanding of performative practice and the intelligence and primacy of the body, deeper meaningful insights may be elicited. Why might dance be such an essential part of ritual and spatiotemporal placemaking? How does the presence of the body and its movements enhance and underpin ritual activity in diasporic settings in particular? What part does trance, possession and bodily mortification play in the efficacy and legitimacy of ritual practice? How might such events and procedures affect religious identity formation in post-colonial settlement? I am especially interested in how place, space and time – that is, aspects of spatiotemporal convergences – play such a significant and sometimes contested part in diasporic existence and place-making. I argue too how the production of knowledge from the body may shape the way human beings think, leading to new understandings about the agentive, lived experience of the body in dance/movement and ritual, and its primacy in revealing knowledge. Learning to hear, and to heed the voice of the body and the embodied self needs sensitivity, practice and commitment, perhaps even an exploration into the unknown.

Panel 5 NOV. 17

11:30-13:30



Chair: Prof. Dr. Michael Lackner * Discussant: Prof. Dr. Andreas Nehring

“Science as Legitimizing and Delegitimizing Means”

Science and scientific discourses and forms of evidence have been incorporated in various esoteric practices in different parts of the world to negate their “religiosity” (as in XIX. century Scientific Spiritism) and to make a scientific claim of authenticity, rationality, and (avant-garde) modernity. In some cases esoteric practices undergo a reverse process whereby they are being renegotiated, rewritten, re-sacralized, and re-inscribed within revisionist historical-geographical narratives of continuity that excise the scientific period as the result of colonial Western processes not intrinsic to the authenticity of these practices.

Prof. Dr. Kocku von Stuckrad (University of Groningen)

The ‘Paradox of Astrology’: A Chimera of European Hegemonic Thinking

The practice of astrology in Europe and North America confronts us with a seeming paradox: On the one hand, astrology has been radically delegitimized by standard rules of scientific evidence; on the other hand, astrological knowledge claims are accepted by large segments of contemporary societies. How can we explain this discrepancy against the background of authentication politics of esoteric practices? Instead of engaging in the common rhetoric that asks, “Why do they believe in astrology although everyone knows it is wrong?”, I argue that astrology is an excellent case if we want to understand the plurality of knowledge systems and rationalities in multiple modernities, as well as the changing attributions of rationality and irrationality, or science and pseudo-science, in conflicting discourses of ‘modernity.’ A major mode of authentication in astrology is the sheer age of the ‘science of the stars’: For almost 5,000 years, astrology, which can best be described as a natural philosophy, has combined empirical and hermeneutical strategies to interpret the correlation between movements of the stars and life on earth. Compared to global developments, the European delegitimization of astrology as a valid knowledge system since the 19th century is an exception, and it is clearly tied to European hegemonic-colonial discourses of ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘modernity.’ Yet even

in Europe and North America, new ways of intellectual authentication of astrology have been put forward since the early 20th century. Some of these views were explicitly based on developments in the sciences, others argued for astrology as a non-reductionist and holistic alternative to (and thus a critique of) hegemonic science, and yet others pointed out that there are different ways of knowing with equal validity for individual practitioners. Reviewing these rational explanations leads to the conclusion that the 'paradox of astrology' is a chimera born from European rhetorics of superiority.

Dr. Stéphanie Homola (CNRS/Institut Français de Recherche sur l'Asie de l'Est, Paris)

Blogging Esoteric Knowledge: The Case of a YouTube Diviner

This paper examines the changing patterns of transmission of traditional knowledge in contemporary Taiwan, using the example of divinatory arts. In postwar Taiwan, practitioners from the mainland played a vital role in passing on horoscope techniques to native Taiwanese, mostly through a narrow and secretive mode of transmission based on a personal, elective relationship between master and disciple. Beginning in the late 1980s, Taiwanese practitioners who had appropriated the techniques sought to establish a new paradigm for the transmission of divinatory knowledge. The so-called "Modern school" of horoscopy sought to establish an open, academic-like discipline in order to adapt it to the expectations of modern society: former esoteric practices could be taught in collective classes, within the framework of institutions independent of the influence or charisma of specific individuals. This opening process has recently gone a step further with the boom of the Internet and social media. In particular, a younger generation of practitioners is challenging both the older master-disciple relationship and the classroom as a modality of knowledge transmission. Drawing on a mixed methodology that combines anthropological fieldwork and digital ethnography, this paper examines the case of a popular blogger who created a YouTube channel to impart—carefully selected—divinatory knowledge to the online generation. This case reveals the multi-layered tensions and modes of legitimization—secrecy and science, perseverance and ready-made knowledge—that pervade the process of transmission and vulgarization of esoteric knowledge in contemporary societies.

Prof. Olav Hammer (University of Southern Denmark)

Dream Interpretation, Divination, and Scientific Credibility

The present paper examines the fluid and contested field of modern Western dream interpretation through the lens of a specific case: Danish practitioners who market their skills in interpreting dreams as a way to help others address various quandaries, focusing in particular on the most visible entrepreneur of this kind on the Danish market, best-selling

author, media personality, blogger, and independent business consultant Michael Rohde. Rohde has created an eclectic but recognizably Jungian and human potential-based model of dream interpretation that combines references to archetypes with claims that dreams can unlock the dormant creative powers of the mind and promotes this approach as based on cutting-edge science. This case is placed within the broader context of the very diverse Western understandings of the function and content of dreams that have had a significant cultural presence in the modern period, i.e., from the turn of the twentieth century (with the publication of Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* as a watershed moment) to the present day. These understandings span a broad spectrum, with, at one end, the suggestion that dreams are mere by-products of brain physiology and, at the other, the conviction that portentous personal significance can be found in them. Proponents of the latter view, in turn, have created numerous interpretive models with few if any shared traits. They can be seen as culturally constructed hermeneutics and hence as examples of divination. From this perspective, Rohde's work comes across as a divinatory practice with roots in an older interpretive tradition, carried out within a modern cultural context where references to science and the empirical evidence of accumulated first-hand experience are important selling points in promoting books, workshops, one-on-one sessions, and other products on a competitive market where other practitioners can choose instead to emphasize the holistic and deeply spiritual nature of their practices.