



CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES WINTER SEMESTER 24/25

Tuesdays | 6.15–7.45 pm

Location: Big Seminar room,
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Link for virtual attendance: <https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>



OCTOBER
15, 2024

PD Dr. Viola Thimm (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

"Super-Power" in the Grave: Meaning-Making of Muslim Saints' Graves in Southeast Asia and on the Arabian Peninsula

This lecture shows, in comparative perspective, how state institutions in Malaysia and on the Arabian Peninsula (United Arab Emirates: UAE, and Oman) classify certain spiritual practices undertaken at graves of former religious leaders or prophets as superstitious (*khurafat*) and, therewith, unacceptable in Islam. Manifold groups of people in both far away and transregionally connected regions believe in a "super-power" (*keramat*) the dead person had and in miracles that surrounded them. However, the way the super-power is dealt with at the graves varies greatly depending on the religious, ethnic and Islamic ideological background of the people. By presenting ethnographic examples resulting from field research in all three regions, this presentation will illustrate which role Islamization and, most recently, Arabization, play in this regard in Malaysia on the one hand. On the other hand it will show how Wahhabi influence in the UAE and the unique strand of Ibadi Islam in Oman form the socio-cultural and religious contexts of handling the graves. Thus, against the backdrop of syncretic and multireligious traditions in all three regions, the ideological orientation of Islam and the perception of what is considered to be superstitious and magical is the decisive factor for a canalizing, disciplining or even repressive form of handling religious and spiritual practices at the *keramat* graves.

OCTOBER
22, 2024

Prof. Michael Taussig (Columbia University)

Fairy Castles Gliding Like Swans: How Daydreaming Affects Writing and Analysis

SPECIAL
LECTURE AT
ORANGERIE

Let us consider the combined impact of drawing and daydreaming on our writing. I do this as I reflect on my book, *Palma Africana*, concerned with the rapid spread of an oil palm plantation in northern Colombia, enabled by paramilitary violence.

OCTOBER
29, 2024

Dr.phil. Dr.rer.med. Dominique Hertzler (CAS-E Fellow)

Unlocking the Unknowable: Exploring Intuitive Cognition in the Yijing (Book of Changes)

Any form of divination goes beyond the limits of ordinary knowledge. Fortune-telling always seeks to obtain knowledge about what cannot usually be known, not least because its concern is often – but not necessarily – directed into the future. Whether this is possible at all or is only the result of deception or charlatanry, was and has been the subject of (more or less) scientific investigations for more than 3000 years. Every form of prognostics is just as fallible as it is not always rational or even scientifically verifiable. From an epistemological perspective it is, however, not very helpful to speak of a duality of rationality and irrationality. How does the Yijing itself explain how do we get to know what we cannot know? Based on Peter Struck's research on "Divination and Human Nature" I will show, that the Yijing (Book of Changes) serves as a platform for divinatory knowledge guided by both intuition and rational understanding. Using the concepts of resonance (*gan* 感) and contemplation (*guan* 觀) as we find them in the Yijing-text itself, we will explore the characteristics of the concept of intuitive insight in the context of the divination process. We will see how the different levels of the Yijing – i.e. the symbols of the tri- and hexagrams as well as the hexagram- and line-statements – interact to stimulate intuitive cognition accessible to rational thought.



Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg

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NOVEMBER
5, 2024

Prof. Roger Canals (University of Barcelona)

Visual Miracles, Trust, and the Cinematic Experience

Images and visibility are fundamental aspects of religious experience. Within the context of ritual, images of spirits may become diapositives of presence which allow believers to be in contact with the sacred world. The capacity of seeing beyond ordinary sight is one of the strongest relational elements that operates during religious ceremonies. Religious tradition shows countless examples of "visual miracles" (apparitions, self-generated images, living icons). Yet all these elements involve, in one way or another, a component of "trust" – and of "visual trust" in particular. How can cinema grasp the importance of visibility in rituals, and how can it approach the world of the non-directly visible? Is it possible to film visual miracles? Does the presence of the camera alter the relation of trust that believers maintain with images and with the act of seeing and being seen? Based on a long fieldwork in Europe and the Caribbean, this talk proposes a theoretical and practical reflection about how cinema allow us to see and make visible what we could not see otherwise.

NOVEMBER
12, 2024

NO LECTURE

NOVEMBER
19, 2024

Prof. Audrius Beinorius (Vilnius University, Lithuania)

Malleable Fixity: On Destiny, Agency and Indian Astrologers

The lecture is based on recent field research conducted among professional astrologers in Kolkata. The questions I ask are: What brings Indian clients to an astrologer? What is the primary approach in counseling – fatalistic, deterministic or proactive, based on "personal choice"? What role does the client's religious worldview play in "counseling therapy" and what specific religious remedies are prescribed? Anthropological perspectives often overlook critical aspects of astrological counseling sessions, especially those aspects that deal with increasing a person's awareness of their experiential situation and promoting a proactive psychological attitude. It is still widely believed that the Hindu commitment to the law of karma implies a kind of fatalism – a resignation to an inevitable future event. I argue that astrological counseling in India constructs a new narrative of life, and that dealing with a "negotiable fate" affirms an active and pragmatic strategy to cope with obstacles and the reintegration of the individual into society and the cosmos.

3.15pm: Screening of documentary "Managers of Luck" by Eglė Vertelytė and discussion with Prof. Beinorius

NOVEMBER
26, 2024

Prof. Per Faxneld (Södertorn University, Stockholm)

A Touch of Zen: Spirituality in Japanese Martial Arts in Sweden

ON ZOOM

The talk presents the first full-scale study of spirituality in Japanese martial arts (Budo) in the West. Taking Sweden as its case study, it will be argued that Budo can be framed as part of the international holistic-alternative milieu. Whereas the latter is traditionally seen as dominated by women, around 74% of Swedish Budo practitioners are male. By including Budo under the holistic heading, the project interrogates the claimed gender imbalance of said milieu and looks at ideals of spiritual masculinity in Budo containing a critique of hegemonic, secular Western masculinity. The talk will moreover propose that "Budo spirituality" is the product of multidirectional cultural transfers between "East" and "West", involving, e.g., esoteric teachings like Theosophy as a bridge. It will also demonstrate how attention to such long-term intercultural entanglement lets us better understand the role of concepts like ki (a form of subtle energy), meditation, and self-development, as well as the strong perennialist-tinged focus on lineages in Budo as practised in Sweden. Analyzing Swedish Budo practitioners' negotiations of the tension between secularity and spirituality (for example regarding ki as a spiritual, scientific, or entirely symbolic phenomenon), the project moreover deepens the understanding of the secular condition in today's Sweden. The investigation encompasses discourse analysis of a large corpus of Swedish Budo texts from ca. 1900–2020, a survey, participant observation, and ca. 20 interviews. A discussion of this methodological approach will form the core of the talk.



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DECEMBER
3, 2024

Dr. Davide Marino (CAS-E Fellow)

Translating Western (?) Esotericism (?): The People's Republic of China

This presentation is a first attempt at studying the Chinese academic production of what is commonly understood as “Western esotericism”; as such, it aims to de-westernize a field that has for too long suffered from essentialism and Euro-/America-centrism. Despite its insularity, a growing interest in “Western esoteric” themes is noticeable in mainland China both among the educated public and within academia. This presentation offers several Chinese approaches to themes and lexica often understood as integral to an allegedly Western esoteric corpus. Of particular importance in this regard are Chinese scholars’ perspectives on the difficulties of translating the field’s technical vocabulary (e.g. “esoteric/ism”, “occult/ism”, “alchemy”, etc.) from European alphabetic languages into logographic ones, such as Mandarin. The study of contemporary Chinese translanguaging and meaning-making strategies will reveal how contemporary Chinese scholars involved in the translation of “Western esotericism” are not just studying foreign (Western) terms and discourses, but also generating new religious theoretical spaces within their indigenous tradition.

DECEMBER
10, 2024
ON ZOOM

Prof. William Mazzarella (University of Chicago)

Advertising as Integral Magic: An Afterlife

What if one were to take seriously the proposition that advertising isn't like magic, rather it is magic? And further, what if advertising isn't just a matter of manipulation, but also, for the magician themselves, a question of entering a volatile relation with ambiguous powers? My talk explores this theme via the story of the rise and fall of Kersy Katrak – charismatic Bombay adman, published poet, and practicing occultist. The talk is at the same time, in a minor key, a meditation on the long tail of ethnographic enchantment.

DECEMBER
17, 2024

Joanna Katharina Kiefer (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Practices of Multiple (Religious) Affiliations: Spatial and Practical Negotiations in Havana, Cuba

The Cuban capital Havana has a long history of religious diversity due to its intertwined (colonial) history. At present, Catholicism, established Protestantism, new evangelical communities and Cuban religions of African origin are among the major groups alongside numerous religious minorities. During my field research on religious plurality in Havana, practices of multiple affiliation to different religious groups as well as their spatial manifestations and practical negotiations have come into focus. In this lecture, I will explore the question of how the spaces and practices resulting from multiple affiliations are negotiated. In doing so, I will look at multiple religious affiliations in two ways: on one hand, as spatio-temporal overlaps of religious or esoteric practices and, on the other, as multiple affiliations of one and the same person. What precisely occurs in these instances, and how can they be conceptualized in a way that is both accurate and coherent? After a historical introduction and reflections on the conceptualization of religion and esoterism in my research, I will pursue these questions using empirical data (field notes, photography) from my ethnographic work in Havana, focusing on the overlaps between Cuban religions of African origin and Catholicism.





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**JANUARY
7, 2025**

Dr. Tommaso Previato (CAS-E Fellow)

Sufi Saints and Their Contestation in the Modern Islamic Revival: Lessons from the Chinese Qadiriyya and Jahriyya

Encouraged by the shift in China's religious rhetoric under the open-door policy, the post-Maoist Islamic revival of the 1980-90s marked the end of a phase of political quietism that had informed expressions of Sino-Muslim identity in earlier decades. As exchange opportunities with the Middle East multiplied, the trans-sectarian unity that the Mao-era (1949-76) had paradoxically contributed to shape was confronted by the global currents of Islamic reform. This resulted in reform-minded Muslims pushing against traditional modes of clerical authority, and new sectarian nuances adding to the long-simmering controversy over the credentials of Sufi shaykhs. My project examines how devotional literature in vernacular Chinese became the battlefield where Sufis fought to restore their reputation, thereby proving the legitimacy of their socio-religious institutions and the sainthood of departed shaykhs. It draws on selected texts from the Qadiriyya (*qadar*, lit. "power") - the earliest confraternity to put down roots in northwest China - and the Jahriyya (*jahrī*, "vocal") - a local offshoot of the Yemeni Naqshbandi tradition - to make a more thorough assessment of contentious Sufi ideas, beliefs and practices, including monasticism, veneration of living shaykhs, the building of shrines in their honor, and the making of their relics object of local pilgrimage.

**JANUARY
14, 2025**

Prof. Heather Freeman (University of North Carolina at Charlotte)

Podcasting and Popular Media as Research Advocacy in Magic and Esoteric Studies

Scholars of magic and esotericism advocate for nuanced understandings of religious, spiritual, and magical diversity, which is relevant to both other academic disciplines and lay audiences. These scholars often confront stigmas, however, from religious conservatism, nationalist ideologies, and cultural bias. Nonetheless, popular media forms offer avenues to communicate discipline-specific research to broad audiences. Our diverse team of humanities, social science, and arts scholars created three six-episode seasons of the podcast "Magic in the United States." With funding from a 2023 NEH Media Projects Grant, the series was professionally produced, marketed, and distributed by PRX. Each episode focuses on the magical practices of a specific community and period in U.S. history, unpacking the words "magic," "religion," and "spirituality." Targeting lay audiences, the podcast demystifies these histories through rich storytelling, scholar interviews, and practitioner testimonials. Principle Investigator and podcast host Heather Freeman will discuss listener feedback as well as actions taken by generalist audiences, practitioners, and academics from other disciplines in response to this series. She will also frame this approach as a model for effectively communicating research in magic and esotericism through various media and social platforms.

**JANUARY
21, 2025**

Prof. Sabina Magliocco (University of British Columbia)

The Magical Resistance 2.0: Meme Magic and the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election

ON ZOOM

The 2016 presidential election in the United States saw the emergence of political magic as one modality through which voters attempted to influence the results. Both right- and left-wing groups wielded magic: the right in support of Donald J. Trump, the left as a form of resistance once he had won the election. We documented this range of responses in a special issue of the journal *Nova Religio* published in 2020; my article focused on the use of magic as a form of resistance by modern Pagan witches and other magical practitioners. Drawing on the work of Italian ethnologist Ernesto de Martino, I argued that Trump's victory created a "crisis of presence" for the left which pushed them to develop a range of artistic responses, one of them being magic. In these artistic expressions, the witch emerged as a figure who could counter the destructive powers of darkness, bringing about transformation and regeneration. This lecture reprises my findings in the context of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Using both digital and in-person ethnography, and drawing on the work of Egil Asprem in the special issue cited above, I trace how the figures of the witch and the cat lady were deployed through memes and spells by a variety of left-leaning groups to create collective effervescence around Kamala Harris, the Democratic Party's presidential candidate.





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JANUARY
28, 2025

Dr. Douglas Farrer (CAS-E Fellow)

Art, Dreams, and Witchcraft in the Malay World

Anthropology commenced with the nightdream as the wanderings of the soul to fabricate an alternative rationality of animist ontology. To consider dreaming as embodied rationality, I unpack results from a five-year collaborative ethnography with *bomoh* (spirit-healers) in Singapore and Malaysia. Ethnographic methods from visual anthropology combined with Deleuzian “practical philosophy” help to articulate a deep ecology of dream cognition in bodily resonance. “Shamanic” cultural forms arise upon dreams in what Devereux referred to as “dream learning”. In the Muslim-Malay world attaining permission (*ijazah*) through dream-learning is deemed “witchcraft” (*menurun*). Such dreams form the basis of multiple cultural, performative, healing, and material practices. Painting in waking dreams/trance, *bomoh* channel “divine” power from the unseen realm (*‘alam ghaib*). Conceptualized here as dreamcraft, artists embody, enact, extend, and embed dreams into material culture. Sufi dreamcraft results in artworks that startle the recipient, trigger nightdreams, and prove the reality of the unseen realm. Beyond dreamwork in the Anthropology of Islam, the interpretation of dreams as true, meaningless, or false, dreams build worlds. Dreamcraft has wide purview: Freud created psychoanalysis through the interpretation of dreams, the Qur’an emerged from the lucid dreams of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and as shown here, Wicca sprouted from Malay magic.

FEBRUARY
4, 2025

Prof. Peter Pels (Leiden University)

Sacralizing Human Production: Commodities, Identity Fetishism, and the Spirit of the Screen

This presentation builds on an argument developed in my recent *The Spirit of Matter* (2023) about the “time of things”, where I reconsider the theory of commodity fetishism against the background of the observation that Karl Marx, in his famous formulation of commodity fetishism, was as yet not familiar with advertising: he died at around the time that branding emerged and professional advertisers started to appear. I argue that this is a serious lacunae in understanding commodity fetishism: the tendency to fall back on a Marxist dichotomy between use and exchange value obscures the origins and development of identity fetishism, starting with commercial “exhibitionary complexes” and developed by the rise of advertising. Contrary to many interpretations of Marx’s idea of commodities obscuring their origin in social labor, or those of Walter Benjamin as saying that the work of art loses its “aura” by mechanical reproduction, European commercial spectacles developed plastic materials and mechanical techniques to “sacralize” commodities by copying them for World Exhibitions and branding. This started to undercut the distinction between human manufacture and acheiropoietic (non-human) production which, according to Bruno Latour, underpins iconoclasm – but when confused, generates “iconoclasm”. Some of the origins of this sacralization of human manufacture lie in a North Atlantic political theology of the nation and its heritage (symbolized by the grandeur of Hausmanian Paris being copied in plaster at the Chicago 1893 World’s Fair). The primary example of auratic commodification that I want to highlight here, however, is the peculiar conjunction of the New Age’s “sacralization of the self” with “cyberspace” as the latter was turned into a source of personal salvation by the late 20th-century “spirits of the screen”.

