



CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

CAS-E Newsletter 01/2025

The Center for Advanced Studies [CAS-E](#) investigates practices aimed at predicting, influencing, and orchestrating contingent life events. By bringing together researchers from all over the world, CAS-E compares such practices and examines their resilience despite socio-cultural discourses delegitimizing them.

An Evolving Trajectory

Dear Friends,

As the days in Erlangen are getting longer again, the winter term is coming to an end. Over the past months, a stimulating program of lectures, colloquia and workshops has tremendously enriched our perspectives on matters that are at the core of CAS-E's research activities.

While, thus far, we have explored in depth questions around "What makes a practice 'esoteric'?" and "How (if at all) do such practices transform, in order to adapt to fast changing, progressively connected contexts?", lately, our attention is increasingly drawn towards the power dynamics that, not only, underpin esoteric practices themselves but, also, inform the very formulation of such questions—and who gets to ask them. This translates into crucial queries, such as, "According to whom is a practice deemed 'esoteric'?", "What are the limits of studying esoteric practices academically?", "Can such limits be overcome and, if so, how?", "If not, why may this be the case?", and "What does this mean for the study of esoteric practices, moving forward?". We believe that these are urgent questions, whose relevance extends well beyond our center, and which need to be addressed collectively from multiple disciplinary, methodological and regional perspectives, on numerous levels. We are also convinced that CAS-E is uniquely and optimally positioned to spearhead such conversations and that these will have important ramifications for the wider fields of Esoteric Studies and Religious Studies in the years to come.

Below, you can find out about some of the outcomes of CAS-E's ongoing engagement with these matters and their embeddedness in praxis. In particular, we want to bring to your attention the imminent publication of two peer-reviewed special issues: one that presents the research proposal that led to the establishment of CAS-E and scholarly responses to it; and one that gathers essays written by CAS-E members and alumni on speaking with spirits. We are also excited to announce that the first volume of the CAS-E book series *Esoteric Practices: Global Perspectives*, published by Brill, is under review. These are the first of a series of publications edited by the CAS-E team, featuring the work of CAS-E members and alumni, collectively and individually. Further outcomes of our latest debates are the CAS-E panels we plan to hold at the international

conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE).

As always, we invite you to join the conversation on these important topics every Tuesday during term time at our CAS-E lecture series, or during one of our forthcoming workshops.

Finally, we would like to bid farewell to those fellows who leave at the end of this term, while we get ready to welcome new ones when we reconvene in Erlangen in April.

Happy reading,

Your CAS-E Team



Publications & Conferences

This time, we focus on publications and conference panels that either directly address CAS-E or are collective outcomes thereof. We feature the first two of a series of CAS-E publications, one exemplifying CAS-E's theoretical trajectory and the other demonstrating its praxeological focus. We are also proud to announce that the first volume of the CAS-E book series *Esoteric Practices: Global Perspectives* is currently under review: each of its articles is co-authored by two or three CAS-E members and alumni, making it an experimental, decidedly collaborative and comparative work. With regards to conferences, we invite you to meet us at ESSWE in Vilnius, Lithuania, where we are planning to represent CAS-E with two panels.

CAS-E Special Issues

[Otto, Bernd-Christian](#), ed. Forthcoming 2025. ***Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective***. Special issue for *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*.

An excerpt from the "Afterword" (p.147) to the special issue illustrates the increasing role that the awareness of matters around power has been playing in CAS-E's latest analytical developments:

[W]e need to be aware that resemblances are not merely 'there', waiting to be 'discovered' by researchers but, rather, that they also depend on the situatedness of those who "look and see", and assess these said resemblances. Thus, the task of the researchers includes critically investigating the sedimented practices of looking and comparing as well as the epistemic interests and presuppositions that inform our intuitions. In other words, if adapting the concept of "family resemblances" is not to become theoretically and methodologically evasive, it is necessary to interrogate "why specific features are taken into account and on what grounds similarities are declared" (Maltese et al 2019: 11)

Table of Contents:

- "Introduction: Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective", Bernd-Christian Otto
- "Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective", Michael Lackner, Dominik Müller, Andreas Nehring, Bernd-Christian Otto
- "Esotericism and Religious Studies: Historical Relationships and Contemporary Challenges", Carole Cusack
- "What's Alternative about Alternative Rationality in CAS-E's Definition of 'Esotericism'?", Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler
- "Here, There & Everywhere: Esoteric Practices and the Global Agenda", Wouter J. Hanegraaff
- "Esoteric Practices: Of Secrecy, Resilience and Politics", Elizabeth A. McAlister
- "Sex, Magic, & Rockets or the Implications of the Babalon Working for Theories of Belief and Rationality", Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm
- "Esoteric Practices in a Reflexive and Critical Perspective: Comments on the Project Description for 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective'", Hugh Urban
- "Afterword", Michael Lackner, Giovanni Maltese, Dominik Müller, Andreas Nehring

[Romberg, Raquel](#), ed. Forthcoming 2025. ***Speaking with Spirits. Special issue of Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft***, 19, nr. 2–3 (2024).

Table of Contents:

- "Introduction: Speaking with Spirits: Indeterminate Multisensory Ritual Efficacy", Raquel Romberg
- "Talking with Spirits: Onto-epistemology, Intimacy, and the Force and Tone of Communication", Conerly Casey
- "Multiple Voices and a Single Body: Spirits' Embodiment, Speech, Discourse and Historiography in an Old Ritual Community of Bhutan", Dendup Chopel
- "Shells that Speak: Divination and its Author", Knut Graw
- "Whispers of Spirits: Tracing the Communication Process in Zār Rituals in Hormozgan Province, Iran", Maryam Abbasi
- "A Moonlit Night: Fairy Practice in the Two Bengals", Keith Cantú

- "Resonant Encounters: Luangan Multisensorial Spirit Communication", Isabell Herrmans
- "Multisensorial Poetic Dramas of Indeterminate Brujería Rituals", Raquel Romberg
- "Afterword: Spirit Presence in the World", Paul Stoller

CAS-E Book Series

Esoteric Practices: Global Perspectives

[Otto, Bernd-Christian](#), and [Michael Lackner](#), eds. Under review. *Comparing Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective: Experiments in Collaborative Authorship*. Brill.

- "Introduction", Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Lackner
- "Divination and Mediumship Compared: A Dialogical Essay on the Logic of Ritual Consultations in Senegal and Brazil", Knut Graw and Kelly Hayes
- "Solomon, King of Spirits: Historical and Ethnographic Explorations", Maryam Abbasi, Conerly Casey and Bernd-Christian Otto
- "Converging Cosmologies: Esoteric Practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism in Aleister Crowley's Thelema", Keith Edward Cantú and Lennert Gesterkamp
- "Becoming Superhumans: The Crossroads of Late-Soviet and Western Esotericism", Birgit Menzel and Anna Ozhiganova
- "Moral Economies of Divination: Chinese and Yoruba Technologies, Ethics, Wisdom, and Affect in Comparison", Michael Lackner and Raquel Romberg
- "Resilience and Relationalism: The Persistence of Marginalised Ritual Practices in Indonesia, Bhutan, and Nigeria", Conerly Casey, Dendup Chopel and Isabell Herrmans

More Publications

CAS-E Panels

Comparing Esotericisms: Experimenting in Collaborative Authorship, panel chaired by [Birgit Menzel](#) and [Bernd-Christian Otto](#) at [ESSWE Esotericism and Rationality](#), Vilnius University, Lithuania, June 26–28, 2025.

- This panel presents an introduction and two tandem-papers of an experiment in collaborative, cross-disciplinary co-authorship. The presenters are part of CAS-E and explore this kind of writing as a distinct comparative methodology. The papers will be published, along with others, in an upcoming book, with the aim of bringing new life into the comparative enterprise in the humanities.

The Resilience of Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective: A Typological Survey, panel chaired by [Bernd-Christian Otto](#) at [ESSWE Esotericism and Rationality](#), Vilnius University, Lithuania, June 26–28, 2025.

- The panel presents and compares papers from a special issue organised by CAS-E to explore the apparent resilience of esoteric practices from a global and largely contemporary perspective, against the backdrop of the global proliferation and hegemonic power of scientific and technological rationalities as well as the continued

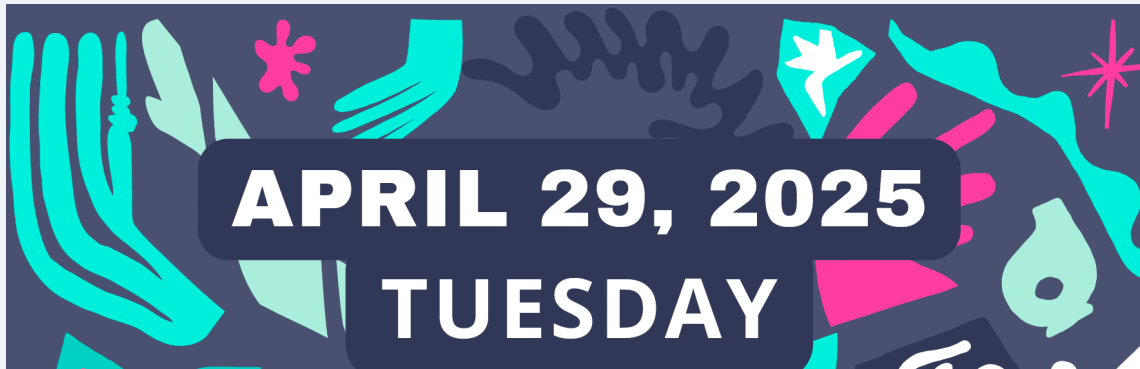
marginalisation and delegitimisation of esoteric practices in discourses orchestrated by religious orthodoxies or political regimes.

More Conferences & Lectures



Events

We are proud to announce a rich program for the **coming summer term, which kicks off on April 29**, with a welcome event for the new cohort of CAS-E fellows and the first lecture of the CAS-E lecture series. As usual, lectures take place on **Tuesdays** at **6.15pm CET** and are free and open to the public: join us in person in the **Big Seminar Room, Building D1, Hartmannstr. 14, Erlangen**, or via [Zoom](#). We will also host a series of workshops, the first of which is Prof. Paul Stoller's popular ethnographic writing workshop "Weaving the World", in May; this is followed by "Hidden Knowledge and Rituals in Indigenous South America and Beyond" in June, and "Spirit Writing" in July. To participate in the workshops, please follow the relevant accompanying information.



CAS-E Lecture Series Summer Semester 2024/25

April 29, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Dr. Steven Engler (CAS-E Fellow)

Views of Healing among Brazilian Spiritists and Medical Professionals

May 6, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Sr. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Fredrik Gregorius (Linköping University)

Dreams of an Enchanted Africa: Esoteric Images of African Diaspora Religions in the 19th and 20th Century

May 13, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Assoc. Prof. M. Shobhana Xavier (CAS-E Fellow)

Saintly Shrines and Ruptures of Temporalities: Sufi Pasts and Futures in Post-War Sri Lanka

May 20, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Prof. Deborah Kapchan (New York University)

Face to Face with the Spirits: Paradox and the Anthropology of the Esoteric

May 27, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Prof. Marta Hanson (CAS-E Associated Researcher)

Knowing Hands: Thinking with the Mind in Hand in Chinese Medicine and Divination

June 3, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Prof. Stephan Palmié (CAS-E Fellow)

Wittgenstein among the Santeros

June 10, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Assoc. Prof. Davide Torri (Sapienza University of Rome)

Nepalese Ghost Stories from Sacred Texts to Social Media

June 17, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Dr. Eszter Spät (CAS-E Fellow)

Divination through the “Written Word” in Yezidi Oral Tradition: “Bookish” Techniques of Prognostication as Sources of Esoteric Knowledge

June 24, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Asst. Prof. Sergio González Varela (CAS-E Fellow)

Facing the Limits of the Extra-Cultural: Discovering “What You Cannot Learn” through Pain, Body Transformation, and Performance in Afro-Brazilian Capoeira

July 1, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Prof. Dr. Birgit Meyer (Utrecht University)

Translating “Spirit”

July 8, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Dr. Lili DiPuppo (CAS-E Fellow)

Sufi Practices and Knowledge through Surrender: Developing a New Knowledge Approach in and for Uncertain Times

July 15, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Dr. Oleg Yarosh (CAS-E Associated Researcher)

Spiritual Practices of Sufis in the West

July 22, 2025 - 6.15pm CET

Dr. Jessica Albrecht (CAS-E Associated Researcher)

Buddhist Psychology as Esoteric Activism

Join us in the **Big Seminar Room**, Building D1, Hartmannstr. 14, Erlangen, or on [Zoom](#).

Come back [here](#) to read the **extended program including abstracts** (available soon).

You can watch the **recordings of past lectures** on our [CAS-E YouTube channel](#).

More on CAS-E Lecture Series

CAS-E Workshops


Ethnographic Writing Workshop "Weaving the World" by CAS-E permanent fellow [Prof. Paul Stoller](#)

When: **May 7, 14, 21, 2025**

Where: **CAS-E**, Big Seminar Room in D1, Hartmannstr. 14, Erlangen

Language: **English**


To apply: raquel.romberg@fau.de



WEAVING THE WORLD: ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING WORKSHOP BY PAUL STOLLER


A limited number of places are available for doctoral students and postdocs from FAU and nearby universities. Travel and accommodation are not included. To apply, please send a short profile and reason for participating plus a CV by April 1, 2025 to Dr. Raquel Romberg raquel.romberg@fau.de


The aim of this workshop is to introduce participants to the fundamental features and essential practices of writing ethnography and creative non-fiction. The primary objective of the course is to show participants how to sensuously describe ethnographic spaces, sounds and characters. Participants will engage in writing exercises that enable them to "Weave the World," a seamless linkage of sensuous description and social analysis. Participants will also be asked to read examples from the work of writers (including ethnographers) who have, in various ways, successfully used « weaving the world » techniques to evoke places and spaces, develop dialogue and craft character. By the end of the course, participants will have practiced writing strategies that they can use to ensure that their future readers come to know a people who live in a particular place. During the workshop participants will be asked to write culture evocatively. The instructor will outline ethnographic writing practices—the "tricks of the trade." He will then ask the participants to begin to "Weave the World" by writing (1) descriptions of space/place, (2) dialogue and (3) character portraits.





Paul Stoller is Permanent Fellow at CAS-E, FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg. He is the author of 16 books. For more than 15 years, he has been facilitating ethnographic writing workshops in Europe, North American and West Africa. His latest book is *Wisdom from the Edge: Writing Ethnography in Turbulent Times* (2023). In 2013 the King of Sweden awarded him the Anders Retzius Gold Medal in Anthropology.


A Three-Day Workshop at CAS-E

 **May 7, 14, 21, 2025**

 Seminar Room 000.235
Hartmannstr. 14, Building Dr,
Erlangen

 Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg

Funded by  Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

 CAS-E
Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

Hidden Knowledge and Ritual in Indigenous South America and Beyond

This workshop, organized by CAS-E alumnus [Dr. Juan Rivera](#), is dedicated to the comparative exploration of hidden knowledges and ritual practices in four

dimensions of life among contemporary indigenous groups in South America (and some comparable areas beyond this region): those closely related to sounds (i.e., production of music and other sonic beings), images (i.e., iconography and chromatism), bodies (i.e., rituals linked to shamanism, healing, witchcraft, and sorcery), and subsistence practices (such as fishing, hunting, agriculture, and herding). Invited guests will be mainly ethnographically trained social anthropologists, but also ethnomusicologists, sociologists, linguists and ethnohistorians, whose research would be preferably based on their own long-term fieldwork on contemporary indigenous societies of South America and beyond.

When: **June 12–14, 2025**

Where: **CAS-E**, Big Seminar Room in D1, Hartmannstr. 14, Erlangen

Language: **English**

For more information: jjriveraandia@gmail.com

In collaboration with: Prof. Dr. Cecilie Odegaard (University of Bergen)

Spirit Writing

In July, CAS-E has the great pleasure of welcoming a group of guests specialized in the ancient practice of Fujii (扶乩 or 扶箕), which is commonly translated as “spirit writing”. Coming all the way from Taiwan upon invitation from CAS-E director, [Prof. Michael Lackner](#), their medium will demonstrate how they convey messages from deities, ancestors or spirits through automatic writing during one ceremony in Erlangen and one in Nürnberg. More information on how to attend the events, which will be open to the general public, will follow.

When: **July 2–7, 2025**

Where: **tba**

Language: translated into **English**

Watch a Spirit Writing ceremony [here](#).



Still image from 113年3月15日 本堂 柳星君&南天扶鸞宣化院 院宰孚佑帝君妙道大天尊 降



Network

With each newsletter, we present you a different set of people from our CAS-E network. This is also the space where we introduce new colleagues and feature CAS-E collaborations.

People

Meet one of our directors, one of our permanent fellows, one of our associated scholars, one of our student assistants, and one CAS-E alumna.



Prof. Dr. Michael Lackner

Michael Lackner is spokesperson for CAS-E and senior professor of Sinology at FAU. His research focuses on the intellectual and religious history of the Chinese-speaking world. He is a senator of the German National Academy of Sciences (Leopoldina) and co-editor of the *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication* and the book series *Prognostication in History* (both published by Brill/Leiden). He was a member of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study and is currently leading the research project “The Global Confucian Analects”.



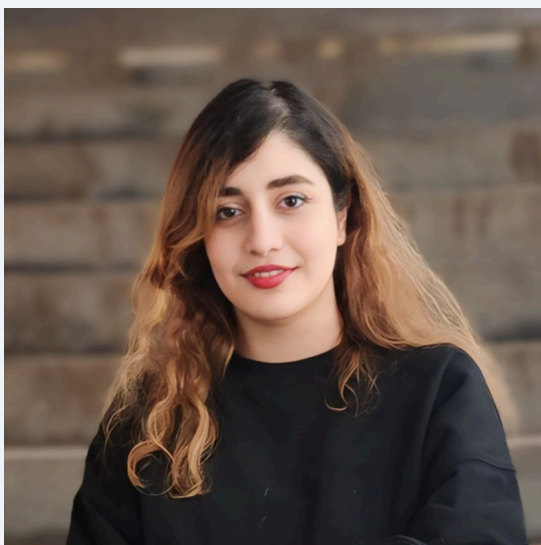
Prof. Dr. Birgit Menzel

Birgit Menzel is professor for Russian Literature and Culture at the University of Mainz, where she has taught at the Faculty for Translation and Interpretation. She has published on Occultism, Altered States of Consciousness, Parapsychology and Transhumanism in Russia. Her current research project is "New Religious Movements in Late and Post-Soviet Russia". She is permanent fellow at CAS-E, where she co-organizes open seminars and the project "The Esoteric in Films", and fosters partnership with the IGPP Freiburg.



Dr. Maryam Abbasi

CAS-E associated scholar Maryam Abbasi is temporary lecturer at SDAC (elite master programs standards of decision making across cultures), and Habilitation candidate at FAU's Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology. Her habilitation project focuses on "The Digital as a Space for Esoteric Practices: An Anthropological Study of Esoteric Practices in Contemporary Iran." Her primary research interests include visual anthropology, the Persian Gulf region, digital anthropology, spirit-mediumship rituals, and Islamic occult sciences.



Melika Lashkari

Melika Lashkari works as a student assistant at CAS-E. She is a Master's student with a focus on English literature and culture. She manages the CRIS Database and serves as the team's graphic designer. She is also part of the public relations team, and she helps them with handling CAS-E's social media platforms and website.



Dr. Isabell Herrmans

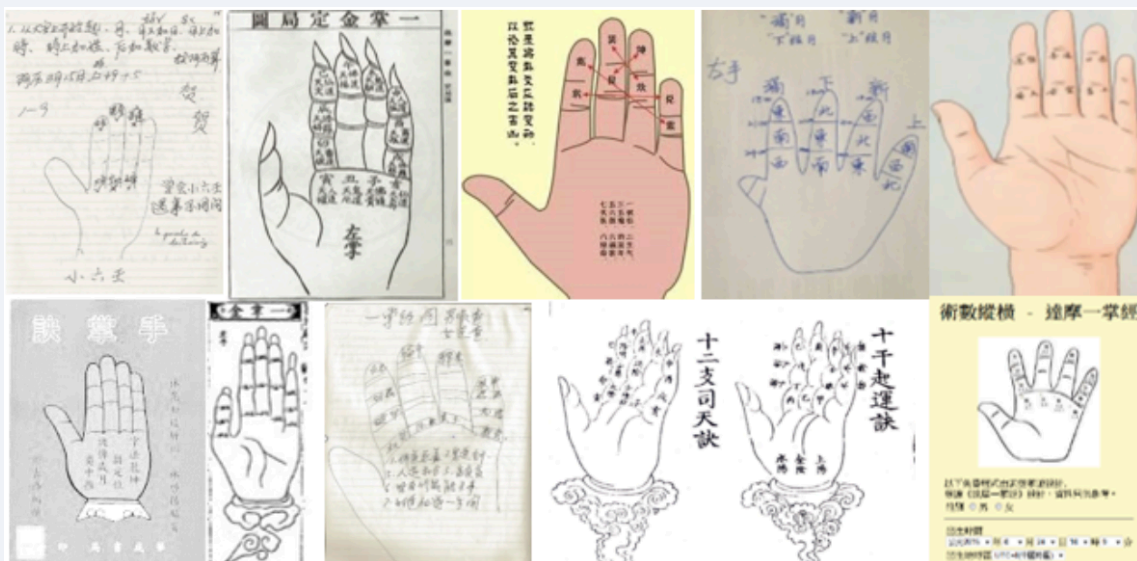
Isabell Herrmans is an anthropologist from the University of Helsinki with a long-term interest in the healing rituals (*belian*) of the Luangan Dayak of Indonesian Borneo. She is the author of the monograph *Ritual Retellings* (Berghan Books 2015). Her current research concerns ritual resilience and negative capability during environmental crisis in Indonesian Borneo. Herrmans was visiting research fellow at CAS-E in 2022/23.

More CAS-E People

New International Collaboration

Knowing Hands: Chinese Hand-memory Techniques and Handy Knowledge in Situ, Comparison, and Contact

CAS-E is thrilled to announce the international research project “Knowing Hands: Chinese Hand-memory Techniques & Handy Knowledge in Situ, Comparison, and Contact,” commencing in April 2025 for a duration of thirty-six months. “Knowing Hands” is a joint German–French collaboration between [Prof. Marta Hanson](#) (CAS-E, Erlangen-Nürnberg) and [Prof. Stéphanie Homola](#) (French National Centre for Scientific Research, CNRS, Paris) aiming to investigate hand-memory techniques from a cross-cultural, comparative perspective. The German wing of the project is carried out at CAS-E and financed by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) with a grant of 408.088 Euro. Read a short project description [here](#).



Patchwork of hand-memory diagrams from various sources (see project link for references)



Bulletin

In this section we update you on the latest news of CAS-E members, fellows and alumni on matters such as external lectures and publications, awards and positions, media coverage, and more.

CAS-E in the News

A Cup with the President - Episode 17: Prof. Dr. Dominik M. Müller

"Each semester, FAU President Prof. Dr. Joachim Hornegger visits professors who have just recently joined FAU. At their respective institutes, he gets to know them better as they talk about their research and share what is important to them." Continue to [German](#) and [English](#) version of the article.



Prof. Dominik Müller. Bild: FAU/Giulia Iannicelli

More Media Appearances

A Special Visit

Visit from Bayreuth University

On December 17, 2024, we had the pleasure of welcoming Prof. Benjamin Kirby from Bayreuth University with some of his students. We look forward to more such visits at CAS-E in the coming terms!



The delegation from Bayreuth University with CAS-E team members and fellows

[Visit the CAS-E Gallery](#)



Media

A far-reaching advancement in the academic study of esoteric practices necessarily needs to be informed by multiple voices and make inclusiveness one of its central aims. Therefore, each CAS-E lecture is followed by a Q&A session, where research outputs can be discussed by scholars from diverse disciplinary, regional, and methodological backgrounds, practitioners, and lay audiences alike. Through our media output, we wish to expand these conversations beyond CAS-E and make them accessible to audiences irrespective of the time-zones and geographical areas they live in. Among our primary outlets feature the CAS-E Blog, the CAS-E YouTube Channel, and CAS-E accounts on various social media platforms, which you can find and follow at the bottom of this newsletter.

CAS-E Blog

Our blog features short writings by the scholars who presented their work at the CAS-E lecture series. In their blog entries, scholars reflect on their research and address broader societal, political, cultural or religious questions in an essay format, making it attractive for academic and non-academic audiences alike. We take this opportunity to introduce our newly established [Academia.edu](#) profile: here, we upload all CAS-E blog entries so that they can reach audiences

beyond CAS-E. We also would like to thank our well-wishers [RENSEP](#) and [Amsterdam Hermetica](#) who, through their social media handles, are supporting our dissemination efforts. If you are interested in the study of esoteric practices, consider following these accounts.



What Kind of Instrument Am I?

By William Mazzarella

Read the blog [here](#).



Ziyārah, Mystical Poetry, and Resurrection of Sufi Saints in Post-Mao China

By Tommaso Previato

Read the blog [here](#).



Malleable Fixity: Indian Astrologers on Destiny and Human Choices

By Audrius Beinorius

Read the blog [here](#).



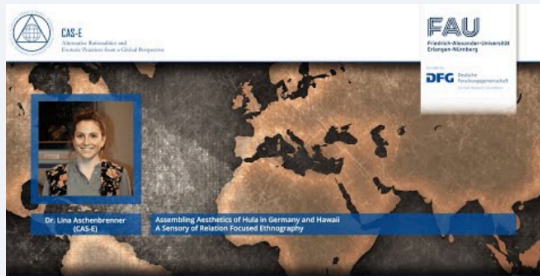
Podcasting and Popular Media as Research Advocacy in Magic and Esoteric Studies

By Heather D. Freeman

Read the blog [here](#).

CAS-E YouTube Channel

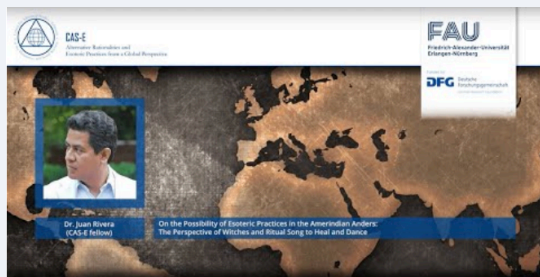
On the CAS-E YouTube channel you can re-watch the talks from our lecture series and catch up on the ones you missed. You will also find brief interviews where our fellows, alumni and team members introduce their respective research areas and interests. Don't forget to [subscribe](#) to the channel to keep up to date with the latest lectures! Have a look at some of the lectures below:



Assembling Aesthetics of Hula in Germany and Hawaii

Lina Aschenbrenner
November 7, 2023

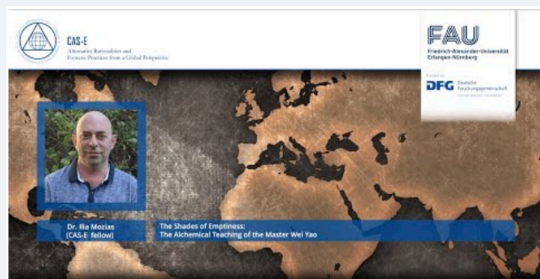
Watch it [here](#).



On the Possibility of Esoteric Practices in the Amerindian Andes

Juan Rivera
November 14, 2023

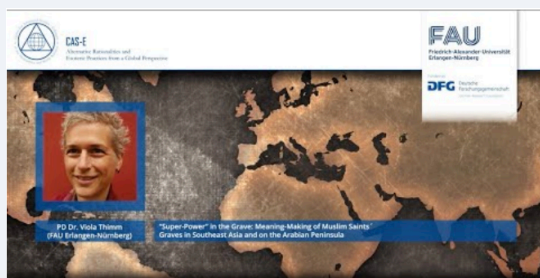
Watch it [here](#).



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

Iliia Mozias
December 12, 2023

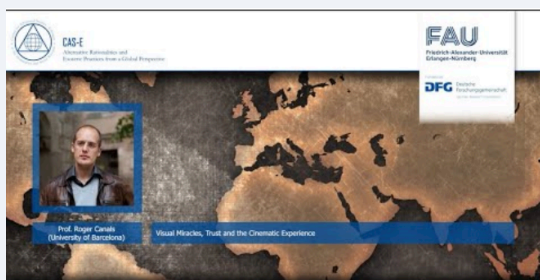
Watch it [here](#).



"Super-Power" in the Grave

Viola Thimm
October 15, 2024

Watch it [here](#).



Sacred Visuality, Trust, and the Cinematic Experience

Roger Canals
November 5, 2024

Watch it [here](#).



DFG Kollegforschungsgruppe „Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric
Practices from a Global Perspective“
Hartmannstr. 14, 91052 Erlangen



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