



CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES SUMMER SEMESTER 2024

Tuesdays | 18:15-19:45

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

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



**APRIL 16,
2024**

Prof. Robert Desjarlais (Sarah Lawrence College, New York)

Walter Benjamin's Berlin Childhood around 2024: Digital Filmmaking and Multimodal Phenomenality

How might we go about understanding the complicated and ever-shifting nuances of bodily experience, sensory perception, consciousness, and memory, time, and history in our lives and the lives of others? I give thought to this question by reflecting – through the prisms of digital filmmaking – on Walter Benjamin's autobiographical writings on his childhood in Berlin, as found especially in the posthumously published text, *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (Berlin Childhood around 1900). My current project engages with Benjamin's writings through the medium of digital filmmaking, in which I seek to portray the many intersecting aspects of Benjamin's childhood, with all of this set within a broader, palimpsestic expanse of place, time, memory, history, and political-cultural formations. In effect, I propose that an ethnographic-historiographic approach to "multimodal phenomenality" – phenomenal moments appearing in multiple, interrelated modalities through complex currents of time – holds the potential to convey well the trans-temporal and inter-media forms of historical consciousness and personal perception and experience.

(A SCREENING AND DISCUSSION WILL FOLLOW ON APRIL 17 11.15 -12.45)

**APRIL 23,
2024**

Prof. Bron Taylor (University of Florida)

Exhibiting Gaian Animism: How Curators Are Fusing Esotericism, Science, Spirituality, and Promoting Environmental Conservation, at Art & Science Museums Around the World

In recent decades scholars from diverse disciplines in the Arts and Sciences have been advancing what I call Gaian Animism, namely, animistic spiritualities, kinship feelings toward non-human organisms, and eco-organicist/Gaian worldviews, in order to promote proenvironmental attitudes and behaviors. With evidence from Europe, Africa, and the Americas, I provide photographs and video excerpts from such venues to argue that curators at many of the world's museums, while sometimes influenced by such scholars, have become influential promoters of such 'dark green' nature spiritualities, values, and behaviors. By so doing they provide paths to spirituality, meaning, and purpose that are especially relevant for those who have left behind the world's still predominant religions. These venues offer religious forms that echo some longstanding religious and mystical perceptions –they also often and increasingly expressing appreciation for and spiritual affinity with indigenous religious traditions –while enriching and reinforcing such perceptions and values with scientific understandings. These spaces also function as shrines and pilgrimage sites for whose sharing deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, and who are themselves seeking to find pathways between their own mystical connections to nature and their respect for the sciences.

**APRIL 30,
2024**

Prof. Pablo Wright (CAS-E Fellow)

Ethnographic Travelogues Through the Argentine Chaco Current Shamanism: Between Healing, Power, and Tradition

The region of the Argentine Chaco, located in the northeast of the country, borders Paraguay and Bolivia. It is home to numerous indigenous peoples, who historically were hunter-gatherers. Since the nineteenth century, they have undergone historical processes of colonization, resettlement, evangelization, and the advancement of the national State, involving cultural transformations influenced by globalization and religious transnationalization. Considering these processes as a key historical scenario, in this lecture I review my travelogues on contemporary forms of Wichí and Qom/Toba shamanism. They display an ample array of cultural forms that express symbolic creativity, sociopolitical agency, and reinvention of traditions. In doing so, resting upon my ethnographic experience in the Chaco region and academic literature, I point out central notions about ontology, power, disease, and therapy, and the ritual practices that condense them. Moreover, I analyze the sociological dimensions within which Wichí and Qom shamanism develop. They include individual shamans per se, and shamanic practices fused within the Christianized framework of the so-called iglesias indígenas (indigenous churches). My anthropological perspective combines postcolonial, hermeneutic, and phenomenological approaches, in dialogue with current critiques of ethnographic writing. The latter stresses intersubjectivity and the existential dimensions of ethnography as key to a deeper understanding of the construction of anthropological knowledge.

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MAY 7,
2024

Dr. Nurul Huda Mohd. Razif (University of Bergen)

Enemies from Within: Love Magic, Sorcery & Intra-female Violence Among Co-Wives in Malay Polygyny

The recent liberalization of legal restrictions on polygyny (one man marrying multiple wives) in Malaysian Islamic family law has enabled Malay men with limited financial wherewithal to take on additional wives, even though many struggle to meet the economic and emotional demands of supporting multiple families. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a decade with two polygynous families in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, this presentation explores how insufficient, unequal, and inconsistent support from polygynous husbands compel co-wives to resort to supernatural means such as sorcery in an attempt to monopolize access to limited resources in the marriage. In particular, I focus on how the “multilocal” set-up of Malay polygyny, in which each wife and her children effectively constitute an independent household and economic unit, fosters a competitive environment built on manipulation, deception, and secrecy. This not only exacerbates suspicions of sorcery among co-wives and children, but also desecrates two core practices of what the anthropologist Janet Carsten calls “making kin” in Malay society: communal living and commensality. The rampant practice of sorcery among co-wives in Malay polygyny, I thus argue, is a form of intra-female violence that is a direct consequence of the religious, legal, and sociocultural patriarchal structures that leave women in a more vulnerable position in an already precarious institution such as polygyny.

MAY 14,
2024

Dr. Stephen Jones

Li Manshan: Portrait of a Folk Daoist (film screening and discussion)

This intimate portrait film explores the life of eighth-generation household Daoist Li Manshan (b.1946), leader of a group of ritual specialists in the poor countryside of Yanggao county in north Shanxi, China. I will briefly introduce the film, and respond to any comments afterwards. I have known the group since 1991, and since 2005 have also taken them on several tours of Europe and the USA. I have presented the film all over Europe, and at several screenings in Beijing. Using footage mainly from the period since 2011 but also from as far back as 1987, the film shows both Li Manshan’s funerary practice as leader of his ritual group and his solo activities—determining the date for the burial, decorating coffins, and even his work in the fields. We are led into the vocal liturgy, percussion, and melodic instrumental music of their magnificent funeral rituals, learning how ritual practice has changed since the 1930s—and even since the 1990s, under challenges such as migration, the modern education system, and the competition at funerals from pop music. Complementing my book *Daoist priests of the Li family: ritual life in village China* (Three Pines Press, 2016), this moving portrait of the diverse activities of Li Manshan and his group serving their local community in a rapidly changing rural China will fascinate anthropologists, scholars of Daoism and folk religion, world-music aficionados, and all those interested in Chinese society.

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STARTS
EARLIER
5.30 PM
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MAY 21,
2024

Prof. Dr. Erhard Schüttpelz (CAS-E Fellow)

The Trajectories of Early Writing Systems and Divination Methods: Some Intercontinental Comparisons

This talk will compare what we know about the relationships between early writing and divination in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica and China. Divination may be conceptualized as divine writing or by practicing transcriptions that evolve into full-fledged writing. or by using existing writing systems for divination. The relationship between writing systems and divination may be conceptualized as a test-case for the crucial factors of state-craft, the administration of proper names, and the control of stellar forces and the seasons (and the gods or the ancestors). Thus, pondering upon the relationships between writing and divination turns into the philological divination of what we don’t know and would like to know about writing. It seems no history of writing systems has recognised this challenge so far, but this may well be a CAS-E of consulting previous scholarship with the help of specialists for intercontinental comparisons.

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MAY 28,
2024

Prof. Abimbola Adelokun (CAS-E Fellow)

Die in the Name of Jesus!: The Animating Performances of "Violent" Prayers

Every day, in thousands of churches and social gatherings across the African landscape, people engage in a sacred activity called "violent prayers." With a dynamic repertoire of embodied expressions and other constitutive performances, prayer is one of the mass cultural performances that emblemizes African inventiveness. Due to its oral narratives, vernacular elements, and continuous practices of cultural retrieval, the performances of prayer in African contemporary culture represents folk culture and sites of collective participation. However, "violent prayers" is a unique interpretation of the Bible verse Matthew 11:12, and its ritual enactment features metaphoric acts of violence devised from a combination of speech and stylized acts. The ultimate purpose of spiritual and social transformation through this performance of "violent prayer" is evidenced by fundamental elements of this ritual that recognizes violence as an essential human condition for which triumph is only possible by returning fire for fire.

In this presentation, I will critically examine the understanding of death and its operative mechanisms as expressed in the performance of prayer denominated by the chants of "Die in the name of Jesus!" Working with the concepts advanced by Orlando Patterson (social death), Achille Mbembe (necropolitics), and Giorgio Agamben (homo sacer), I explore the notions of death that underwrite the performance of this genre of prayer. Death in this sacred ritual is a multifaceted phenomenon. While the loud commands chanted in these spaces demand that all oppressive forces—human and nonhuman—be cut their sources of nourishment, the self-directed prayers of the commander also reveal another layer of death as a condition of a life that lacks necessities and therefore lacking in consequence. By looking at the invocations of death that characterize the animating performances of "violent" prayer, I abstract the practices through which they purport to add life to life.

JUNE 4,
2024

Dr. Kalindi Kokal (CAS-E Fellow)

Mystical Regimes of Order: Ritualistic Practices and Conflict Resolution in Everyday Uttarakhand

This presentation explores the meanings of ritualistic practices in the contexts of societal order and conflict resolution. Drawing on empirical research conducted over a 12-month period, this project delves into local narratives and experiences with esoteric practices that connect bodies and nature bringing them into one continuous whole. In the communities of the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, this interconnectedness is perceived as the very foundation of macrocosmic order. In this project, I examine how people experience rituals in the context of conflict, where situations and the people involved in them are often portrayed in binary ways. Thus, I examine the significance of rituals for concepts of justice, environmental conservation and people's experiences of gender and caste.

This project draws on data that was collected through semi-structured interviews in the form of informal conversations that often spanned several weeks. I have spent close to a decade volunteering with the local communities in rural Uttarakhand, about six months of which (between June 2022 and December 2022) was spent on focused empirical research. However, observation and even dormant participation in ritualistic practices that form an integral part of everyday life and have been part of community access over the last several years also became part of my methods of inquiry.

JUNE 11,
2024

NO LECTURE (CONFERENCE AT SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME)

JUNE 18,
2024

Dr. Judith Bachmann (Universität Heidelberg)

Ifá in Comparison: African Tradition, Esotericism and Christianity in the 19th Century

The oracle Ifá is in a very interesting position. On the one hand, it is considered the entry point into a Yoruba ontology. On the other hand, it is categorised as a divination practice, comparable to other oracles worldwide. As the first observation goes, any and every Yoruba concept should be explained through Ifá, its practices but especially its idioms. These sentences typically uttered in a divination are today comprised in the Ifá corpus, written down since the early 20th century. Yet, before an interest in the totality of its possible utterances emerged, Ifá was already embedded in a number of comparisons that are the roots for both observations – its cultural key position as well as its global comparability. The case study for this argument are public speeches delivered by a Christian West African intellectual, John Augustus Abayomi Cole (c. 1850-1943) who saw in Ifá an indigenous philosophical and esoteric tradition. This perception was possible by his adaption and comparison of Ifá with occultism and through occultism, with kabbalah. This contradicted and reacted to other comparisons that had been common through the 19th century, namely that African practices were, if religious at all, black magic, materialist and spiritualist. To Abayomi Cole, the comparison with occultism helped to elevate Ifá to the realm of religion and science. The thesis is that the ways in which Ifá is considered today can be tracked back to these practices of comparison, even though its traces have been made invisible by the effects of this comparative moment, ethnonationalism, esotericism studies, and the study of religion.



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JUNE 19,
2024

Prof. Dr. Helmut Zander (Université de Fribourg)

How to Globalize a Quintessentially German Practice? Anthroposophy in the Vortex of Globalization

SPECIAL
LECTURE
WEDNESDAY
FROM
11.15 – 12.45

Anthroposophy is a product of the esoteric fever around 1900 and one of the few groups which still exist as institutions today. Its founder, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), claimed that a supernatural world could be recognized with certainty, as in the natural sciences. Central ideas came from the Theosophy of Blavatsky and Olcott, but Steiner connected, hybridized and framed this Theosophy with "German" ideas. More important are the fields of practice that Steiner conceived, especially after World War I: the concept of an alternative society, Waldorf education, anthroposophical medicine and agriculture, and a church inspired by him. Since the last third of the 20th century, anthroposophy has globalized at a rapid, sometimes dizzying pace. One example: Today we have 256 schools in Germany, more than 1,200 schools worldwide and almost 2,000 Waldorf kindergartens. This inevitably involves transformation processes that are almost completely unexplored. I present five case studies: Waldorf education (China/USA); agriculture / education of farmers (USA); conflicts with state religious policies (France); concept of "the Christ" (Egypt). I will develop hypotheses - it is too early for theses - on the following questions: Who controls the transformations in this globalization process? How do cultural contexts change anthroposophical practices and ideas? In more detail: What happens to Steiner's German-influenced ideas? What is the minimal consensus of a pluralized Anthroposophy? The research approach is limited, because not only scientific literature is lacking, but also analyses from an anthroposophical perspective. The open source-material will be evaluated through content analysis.

JUNE 25,
2024

Prof. Henrik Bogdan (Universität Göteborg)

What is Contemporary Esotericism? Reflections on Teaching and Supervising Post-Graduate Students in a Course on Contemporary Esotericism

The study of esotericism primarily revolves around its historical aspects, but it's worth noting that esotericism still plays a crucial role in the modern religious landscape. Some scholars argue that it has become so pervasive in contemporary popular culture that it has led to what is now referred to as an "occulture." This occulture encompasses various esoteric concepts and symbols related to phenomena such as magic, alchemy, and astrology, which manifest in different forms of media, including television shows, movies, music, art, literature, computer games, and notably, on social media platforms. Concurrently, traditional forms of esotericism, such as secret societies and the practice of magic and alchemy, continue to maintain relevance within modern esoteric practices. In this lecture, I will draw on some insights from teaching a post-graduate course in Religious Studies on Contemporary Esotericism at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, which in many ways has challenged my understanding of how to approach the study of esotericism. The course focuses on identifying, discussing, and analyzing the lived experiences of contemporary esotericism, with a particular emphasis on how esoteric practices are carried out and expressed in today's context. A key-aspect of the course is that the students are expected to explore a specific aspect of contemporary esotericism through an individual research paper. As will be discussed in the lecture, these research papers can help us problematize and reevaluate our understanding of the study of esotericism.

JULY 2,
2024

Prof. Dr. Jens Schlieter (Universität Bern)

Esoteric Dimensions of Buddhist Meditation: Reaching Out to Transform Other Peoples' Mind

Instead of dealing with meditation practices of esoteric Vajrayana Buddhism, the presentation will aim to show and discuss esoteric dimensions and an alternative views on the powers of the mind in two classical forms of meditation: Brahmavihara and Dhyana meditation. Especially the former, well known and practiced up to the present day in almost all major Buddhist traditions, shows underlying esoteric conceptions of a mind capable to radiate empathy, love and compassion, actually reaching other people's minds. However, in the Western reception of Buddhism, these aspects are quite often not dealt with as they are in conflict with usual Western readings of "protestant Buddhist modernism."

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JULY 9,
2024

Dr. Stefanie Burkhardt (CAS-E)

Literal Ghosts: African Narratives and Religious Experience as Tools for a Critical Expansion of the 'Spectral Turn'

Ghosts, specters, and revenants are crucial concepts in theories of cultural philosophy in the so-called "spectral turn." Such entities have ceaselessly become key tropes for enabling a thinking of the Other in the sense of that which has been repressed by European Enlightenment thinking. While I recognize the creative power of the "spectral turn," I see two major weaknesses that actually reproduce the fundamental critique such theories make of the displacement of the Other. First, they ignore non-European concepts of the undead and thus remain Eurocentric and universalizing. Second, even those cultural philosophies that transcend the European framework are inherently limited, viewing such haunting phenomena as allegorical rather than empirically reflective of recurrent experiences of people worldwide. My research aims to critically expand the scope of the "spectral turn" by drawing on African and African-diasporic narratives, stories, and concepts surrounding ancestor spirits, the abiku/ogbanje ('spirit child'), and the zombie. While the modern Euro-American ghost story typically revolves around fear, unfinished business, and ontological doubt in light of natural laws, stories anchored in West African ontologies and lived experiences take on alternative forms and meanings, offering tools for decolonizing the "spectral turn." In this lecture, I focus on traditional and fictional narratives about the 'spirit child' that address issues of trauma, exile, family relations, and gender identities. Drawing on philosophical, ethnographic, and literary material, I aim to explore ways to expand theoretical conceptions of spectral phenomena in Western culture in general and in Western esotericism in particular.

JULY 16,
2024

Dr. Darrel Rutkin (CAS-E Fellow)

Marsilio Ficino's Theurgical Astrology: Astrological Theory and Practice at the Root of Modern Esoteric Practices

In this talk, I will first present my reconstruction of Marsilio Ficino's (1433-99) theurgical astrology in his *De vita libri tres* (1489), with a focus on his engagement with planetary spirits. This centrally includes using the birth horoscope or nativity to identify one's guardian daemon, in order to ultimately unify with one's ensouled—and thereby living—ruling planet by means of a ritual Ficino offers for making talismans. I will then use this reconstruction for comparison with the contemporary magic(k)al work of Frater Acher as presented by himself on two of his websites: 'theomagica.com' and 'holydaimon.com' together with Bernd-Christian Otto's recent (2023) illuminating analysis of Frater Acher's contemporary but traditionalist ritual practices for invoking planetary spirits. Acher's ritual practice is inspired by and grounded on the anonymous 16th-century *Arbatel*, but it is also developed together with contemporary theories and practices. I will approach this material in an exploratory manner with a sensitivity to and interest in both premodern and contemporary contexts and mind-sets, and their comparison. In my talk, I will apply the tools of historical anthropology to my reading of Ficino's *De vita*, attempting to deeply understand and thickly describe the characteristic structures of his thought and practice, and thereby provide insight into one of the main texts at the Renaissance roots of the Western esoteric tradition in comparison with a modern-day practitioner of the magic(k)al arts.

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