

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

LECTURE SERIES SUMMER SEMESTER 2025

Tuesdays | 6.15–7.45 pm

Seminar room, Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Link for virtual attendance: <https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>**APRIL 29,
2025****Prof. Dr. Steven Engler (CAS-E Fellow)****“Views of Healing among Brazilian Spiritists and Medical Professionals ”**

This lecture looks at relations between Spiritist and allopathic discourses and practices of healing in a small city in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, where esotericism (Spiritisms) and science (allopathic medicine) are in direct competition as theorists and agents of healing. Sharp distinctions are complicated for three reasons: (i) popular religious beliefs are prevalent throughout Brazilian society (e.g., spirits, supra-natural disease and healing, reincarnation); (ii) a majority of the population sees religious rituals as sources of healing (e.g., popular Catholicism, Neo-Pentecostalism, Spiritisms and other esoteric traditions, especially New Age sensu lato, and Afro-Brazilian traditions; and (iii) Kardecist Spiritism is widely accepted and culturally influential, with tens of millions of non-members regularly participating in rituals. In 2024, I conducted twenty-eight interviews with three groups of individuals: esotericists (Kardecism and Umbanda); allopathic medical professionals not engaged in esoteric practices; and doctors who are also practicing esotericists. Initial results suggest that this is an excellent example of CAS-E’s focus on “dynamics of reciprocal influence, adaptation, assimilation, hybridization and inclusion / exclusion.” Most interviewees draw a pragmatic and relative line between esoteric and allopathic healing (each has its sphere), and none see them as standing in a relation of stark conflict.

**MAY 06,
2025****Sr. Associate Prof. Dr. Fredrik Gregorius (Linköping University)****Dreams of an Enchanted Africa: Esoteric Images of African Diaspora Religions in the 19th and 20th Century**

African Diaspora religions have a long history in the United States dating back to 17th century New England. Their images became central in anti-Black racism, especially under the umbrella term “Voodoo” that had a large impact on popular imagination, becoming synonymous with “Black Magic” in White American imagination. While still written from a White supremacist perspective some of the first that presented these religions from a more nuanced perspective where writers connected to Esoteric traditions like Theosophy and later Thelema. However, few studies on the entanglement between Afro-Caribbean religions and North American Esotericism exist. This lecture focuses on the influence from African Diaspora religions on North American Esoteric traditions, which often had their origins in Europe. It provides a historical background on how African Diaspora religions were imagined by Esoteric writers in the early 20th century, the development of Esoteric forms of Vodou in New Orleans in the 1980’s and adaptation of traditions like Quimbanda. The lecture addresses how African Diaspora religions have had a larger impact on Esoteric traditions than previously understood, especially as a lived practice, but also the problems of practicing spiritualities developed by racially marginalized groups, by people by people coming from a position of privilege.

**MAY 13,
2025****Assoc. Prof. M. Shobhana Xavier (CAS-E Fellow)****“Saintly Shrines and Ruptures of Temporalities: Sufi Pasts and Futures in Post-War Sri Lanka”**

This lecture maps Sufi shrines in Sri Lanka against the backdrop of a post-civil war and growing Buddhist-Sinhala majoritarianism that have impacted numerous minority communities, including Tamils and Muslims. Sufi Muslims’ piety presents a generative prism through which to understand this political, social, and religious context. Tombs to 40 feet long Sufi saints (or giants) dot the island and are believed to be descendants from prophetic times while shrines to women saints draw women from across religious and ethnic communities, such the Nachia saint who disappeared into a cave while being chased by colonial assaulters. Stories of Sufi saints that are sustained at shrines then rupture notions of linear time and space on an island where Muslim communities have not been recognized in the colonial or state archives and continue experience state and communal violence. Stories of saints then embed the islands’ geography within cosmological and metaphysical roots and routes, and the pious acts that unfold at saint’s shrines evade and resist the political oppression of Muslims, in effect summoning religious pasts to survive in troubled presents in the hopes of thriving in Sufi futures.





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MAY 20, 2025

Prof. Deborah Kapchan (New York University)

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

What does it mean to be possessed, to become another? What changes in the brain, in the body and emotions? Does the ability to empathize increase, as in meditation? And what of the capacity to listen, and to hear? In the vast literature on spirit possession, authors rarely inhabit the emic point of view. Some explain possession rationally (as catharsis, a reaction to trauma, symbolic play, a system of social cohesion or a means of gender-bending and temporary power inversion); others aesthetically, as musically-induced performance. The latter is perhaps closest to current understandings of entrainment and brain plasticity, though the question remains: why are scholars possessed with possession? Why the need to translate spiritual realities, particularly those of Africa and its diaspora, in other terms? What does this translation allow “us,” we who study the esoteric, to know and to do? More importantly, what does it allow us to be? In this presentation, I examine the inter-semiotic translation of trance and oneiric consciousness through the prism of Ibn al-Arabi’s Sufi philosophy, to reveal the paradoxical dance of immanence and transcendence in various densities of human existence.

MAY 27, 2025

Dr. Marta Hanson (DFG-funded CAS-E Associated Researcher)

“Knowing Hands: Thinking With the Mind in Hand in Chinese Medicine and Divination”

The concept “Knowing hands” captures how pre-modern people used their hands to think through things, such as macro-microcosm relationships, and to think with, as in cognitive processing. It also captures hand-based interventions such as, in medical care, pulse taking, needling, massage, and ritual healing that also required one’s mind to be at one’s fingertips. The talk will cover two dimensions of what is meant by “knowing hands”; namely, 1) hand-memory techniques – how humans use hands to aid their cognitive processing – and 2) handy knowledge – what knowledge is grasped corporeally and conceptually with hands and so considered “handy” enough to be embodied. This lecture draws from the history of Chinese medicine and divination to cover the spectrum from “knowing hands” to “handy knowledge” that the “Knowing Hands” project sets out to examine within East Asia and compare with examples in other cultural contexts past to present. When Chinese healers, for example, used their hands to memorize concepts related to clinical practice, calculate with time variables, and carry out ritual gestures intended to reduce risk, improve fortune, and even cure, they placed their minds in their hands.

JUNE 3, 2025

Prof. Stephan Palmié (CAS-E Fellow)

“Wittgenstein among the Santeros”

Proceeding from a perspective guided by Wittgenstein’s “second philosophy,” this lecture aims to probe the limits of the ethnographic endeavor vis a vis worlds unthinkable in terms of the ethnographer’s own “hinge propositions” around which doubt can turn, but which cannot themselves be allowed to fall into doubt. To do so I revisit a set of ethnographic data from my first fieldwork among practitioners of Afro-Cuban ritual traditions in Miami where I was repeatedly told that the spirit of a dead slave named Tomás was watching over me. I had originally used the “idea of Tomás” as an analytic device to establish my own implication in a violent Atlantic modernity whose (however unwitting) heir I, like all “moderns”, am. Here, however, I explore how a Wittgensteinian approach may help us overcome a facile representationalism, give the dead – Tomás, no less than Wittgenstein – a place in the scaffolding of our mind, engage them as metapersons, and so perpetuate their presence in our worlds or forms of life.





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**JUNE 10,
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Assoc. Prof. Davide Torri (Sapienza University of Rome)

“Nepalese Ghost Stories from Sacred Texts to Social Media”

What are we talking about when we are talking about ghosts? A ghost is, first and foremost, a story: it exists in a narrative dimension and perpetuates itself by it. Before witnesses, a ghost needs listeners. In this regard, it is a story which unsettles and scares, something which keeps coming back from the past. It is the past which has not died yet, forced to resurface again and again in order to be acknowledged, solved and settled. In this chapter, the author will explore the topics and contents highlighted by ghost stories and narratives from Nepalese classical texts to contemporary social media, in order to analyze their meanings, roles and functions while at the same time mapping continuities and discontinuities between religious, folkloric and popular themes.

**JUNE 17,
2025**

Dr. Eszter Spät (CAS-E Fellow)

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

This lecture explores the divinatory practices of Iraqi Yezidis as a means of accessing esoteric knowledge (‘ilmi batinî) within an oral religious tradition. I examine how these practices predict the future, alleviate afflictions, and overcome obstacles, while also providing Yezidis with a direct form of “bookish” revelation from the spiritual world in place of written sacred texts, within a cultural context where only religions of the book have historically held legitimacy. Central to these practices is the Book of Angel Sheikh Sin, manuscripts of which are held by select priestly families. Considered to channel divine revelation, it is used in the creation of amulets, reflecting influences from written Islamic esoteric traditions. Similarly, the phenomenon of “falling into book,” where Yezidi seers enter altered states of consciousness to communicate with the supernatural, underscores the interaction between the conceptualizations of oral and bookish revelation. While often dismissed by religious elites and scholars of textual traditions, I argue that these practices play a significant role in Yezidi spiritual and communal life. Moreover, their study provides insight into the influence of neighboring bookish religions on Yezidism and the impact of literacy on Yezidi religious orality.

**JUNE 24,
2025**

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

Human beings are often considered trapped in a world governed by cultural conventions that dictate their actions and behaviors. Anthropologists immerse themselves in other cultures through participant observation and acquisition of new conventions, which can include internalized social norms, a new language, emotions, altered body behavior, and heightened sensory perception. This presentation challenges the notion of complete confinement within conventional worlds. I propose the existence of a domain at the boundaries of conventionality, which aims to transcend it, called the extra-cultural. My extensive fieldwork in Afro-Brazilian capoeira supports this idea. Capoeira apprenticeship involves discovering esoteric power, called mandinga, and an alternative “reality” through body submission to pain during rigorous long-term training with a highly skilled mentor, called mestre. The pursuit of power in capoeira attempts to liberate the body from cultural constraints during ritual performances, aiming to transcend the ordinary and attain an extraordinary experience. This can be observed in the loss of body control guided by enigmatic forces that enable seemingly impossible feats, and the stealing of power of others through deception. In essence, at the intersection of culture and the human measure of the body, capoeira presents new possibilities beyond those constrained by prevailing cultural norms.



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Erlangen-Nürnberg

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**JULY 1,
2025**

Prof. Dr. Birgit Meyer (Utrecht University)

“Translating ‘Spirit’”

Based on my work as part of an international team that tracks the trajectory of a collection of spiritual artifacts from South-eastern Gold Coast (now Ghana) and South Togo by missionaries of the Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft to the Übersee-Museum Bremen, in this lecture I address the pressing question how to find a language to speak about the “items” included in this collection. Undertaking an archaeology of the subsequent meanings and values bestowed on - and thus contained in - these displaced matters, pertinent questions arise about how to speak about the first layer in which the artifacts were called dzokawo, legbawo, and aklama. How did the subsequent translations, by missions and museum anthropology, into registers as “idolatry” or “fetishism”, “charm” or “magic” and “ethnographic object” occur? What can be shown to be lost in these hegemonic translations through their critical deconstruction? How to retranslate the English term “spirit” outside of the frame of religion? My concern is to avoid essentializing pitfalls that come with a view of Africa shaped by terms as spirit, spiritual or animist, and at the same time, inspired by Bachir Diagne, to offer hospitality to translations of “spirits” in decolonial modes of knowledge making.

**JULY 8,
2025**

Dr. Lili DiPuppo (CAS-E Fellow)

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

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Sufi circles in Belgium, I explore how contemporary Muslims find inspiration in the Islamic knowledge tradition to respond to the challenges humankind faces in the contemporary world. I examine how my interlocutors reflect on their daily existence and the experiences and wisdom they encounter on their spiritual paths when confronted with current challenges such as wars, pandemics, the ecological crisis and the potential threats posed by AI. In the ceremonies I attend and in my conversations with Sufi disciples, an approach to knowledge emerges that I call “knowledge through surrender”. This form of knowledge means cultivating attentiveness to the world, its wonders and mysteries, being receptive to the presence of God in creation, and cultivating awareness of the invisible dimensions of existence. This position of surrendering that my interlocutors adopt and that I also encounter during my fieldwork contrasts with a conventional scientific approach, in which ideals of predictability and control and the belief that scientific knowledge is able to anticipate and mitigate contemporary threats are foregrounded. I reflect on how an experiential knowledge influences my own methodological approach, unveiling parallels between anthropological fieldwork and the spiritual journey as a continuous exploration and transformation of the self.

**JULY 15,
2025**

Dr. Oleg Yarosh (DFG-funded CAS-E Associated Researcher)

“Spiritual Practices of Sufis in the West”

I will present ideas and preliminary findings related to my forthcoming CAS-E research project (2025-2027) that aims at exploring spiritual practices in Western Sufi communities, analyzing how practitioners interpret and legitimize it amid changing cultural contexts. Sufism in the West exemplifies cross-cultural exchange (Malik and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2019) and is prone to cultural and epistemological hybridization expressed in discourses and practices (Piraino 2024). Spiritual practices in Western Sufi communities encompass traditional ones such as dhikr, semāʿ, ḥaḍrah, murāqabah, as well as entangled practices like breath-work (Yarosh 2021; Selim 2024), Chi Gong, various meditation techniques, Enneagram (Sedgwick 2021; Piraino 2024), and a range of healing practices (Selim 2015). My research, in particular, focuses on entangled practices that have emerged in perennialist/universalist and hybrid Sufi communities (Hermansen 1997). Since 1980s Sufism in the West gradually underwent re-/Islamization, conforming to the global norm to identify Sufism primarily with Islam (Sedgwick 2019), or the ‘turn to authenticity’ when followers embrace more ‘authentic’ forms of ‘Sufi life’, imitating Sufism that is traditional for their Shaykh’s homeland (Klinkhammer 2009). Despite this ‘turn’, some practitioners utilize these entangled spiritual practices at both the communal and individual levels (Yarosh 2018; 2021).





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**JULY 22,
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Dr. Jessica Albrecht (FAU, CAS-E Associated Researcher)

“Buddhist Psychology as Esoteric Activism”

Buddhist Psychology is a field that can be seen as translating Buddhism into the language of Psychology or vice versa. In any case, it is marked by the attempt to provide an equal or additive form of psychology by negotiating between Buddhism as religion and as a scientific view of the world, the body and the mind. Such a translation between the language of psychology and that of Buddhism has been taken place at least since the late 19th century with the work of Caroline Rhys Davids who, as a feminist and psychologist, translated Pali Buddhist scriptures into a - sometimes activist - psychological framework. In this talk, I show how this translation process started by Rhys Davids contributed to various contemporary fields of Buddhist Psychology, in particular Black / African Buddhism as well as Disability Activism. I argue that both of these should be seen as forms of social activism that are esoteric - meaning that they are negotiating between religion and science as two realms of truth claims, individual and collective experience and forms of legitimization.



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