

## The Resilience of Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective - Part 2

15:30 - 17:30 Thursday, 26th June, 2025

Room 207 (Universiteto str. 9)

Bernd-Christian Otto

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### 25 The resilience of esoteric practices from a global perspective, part 2

#### Chair

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#### Discussant

### 168 THE WITCH AS 'OTHER', THE WITCH AS 'US': REPRESENTATIONS OF RESILIENCE IN CIRCUMCISION RITES AMONG THE AMANGOCI YAO

Markus Mannberg

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#### Abstract

This paper explores the resilient nature of initiation ceremonies (most notably circumcision rites) among Yao peoples of southern Malawi. Since implementation of the multi-party-political system in the early 1990s, and until the backdrop of the HIV/Aids epidemic, national and global discursive critiques against rural Yao ritualism have been contextualized through a variety of dichotomizations such as 'modern' vs. 'traditional', 'urban' vs. 'rural', and 'religious' vs. 'cultural'. While these discursive inquisitions constitute central components for the economy of sustainability in Malawi, governmental and non-governmental interventions against *jando* have been met with skepticism and outright rejection among its proponents. In this paper, I argue that ritual resilience among the Yao of southern Malawi is both a contemporary response to a perceived dissonance of globalization processes paired with a general tradition of resistance and adaptation, as well as a *basic ontological feature* of its ritual makeup. As a comparatively recent Islamic ritual in Malawi, *jando* constituted a colonial critique against the British empire and an indication of allegiance with Swahili Arabs of Eastern Africa. On a micro level, and of particular interest in this paper, ritual experts (namely the circumcizer) rigorously employ a number of apotropaic magical means to protect the ritual camp against social threats, broadly conceptualized as diverse acts of witchcraft. These perceived acts, conjuring visions of an ultimate 'other', can be understood as discursive representations targeting global relations, technologies and transformations, whether these be new capitalist markets, rapid population growth or climate change.

This paper argues that resilience is inherent to the ritual itself; one that came about to distinguish itself in the newly emerging religious landscape of colonial Malawi; one that addresses and negotiates a pan-cultural Malawian understanding of being-in-the-world as *cyclical*; and one of uncertainty, jealousy and evil; of witchcraft and satanism.

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### 167 Digitalization is resistance: Social Media-Based Esoteric Practices in Contemporary Iran

Maryam Abbasi

#### Abstract

In contemporary Iran, *Olum e Gharibeh* ('Occult Sciences') refers to a range of esoteric practices such as oracle (*Fal*), coffee reading (*Fal e ghahve*), dream interpretation (*Taabire khab*), exorcism (*Jen giri*), talisman (*Telesm*), fortune-telling (*Pishguae*), and prayer-writing (*Doa nevisi*) that are used to overcome personal obstacles and gain insights into the future through interactions with supernatural beings. In recent years, the advent of social media platforms and their increasing influence on people's lives has resulted in the growth of various forms of spirituality and thus also led to a revival of occult sciences that were previously restricted by governmental and religious authorities and marginalized by the middle class. This talk is based on an ongoing ethnography of social-media-based *olum e gharibeh* in contemporary Iran and explores the interplay between these practices and social media in order to determine how digitalization has influenced both the resilience and expansion of esoteric practices in contemporary Iran.

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### 163 CHILDREN OF NEW AGE: PATHWAYS TO RESILIENCE OF LATE SOVIET ESOTERIC PRACTICES

Anna Ozhiganova

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#### Abstract

The paper deals with the late Soviet project called Aquaculture, which aimed to create new spiritual children with paranormal abilities, able to live in the ocean in contact with dolphins. Practices shaped by this project, such as underwater childbirth and water training of newborns, continue to exist almost half a century after their emergence, in very different socio-economic and cultural contexts. This resilience has been achieved through the adoption, transformation, and reinterpretation of these practices by the global New Age. An analysis of how this adaptation has taken place shows that the desire of Soviet esotericists for international recognition and their active interaction with representatives of the New Age movement behind the Iron Curtain have played an important role. The coincidence of two themes of Aquaculture with the current agenda of the global New Age: the arrival of new spiritual children and the new holistic concept of childbirth, was crucial for the sustainable reproduction of these practices. The Dolphin Children, as well as the Indigo Children, act as a metaphor for the spirituality and spiritual plasticity that seems universal to modern esotericism. The belief in the arrival of spiritual children has become a marker of a new appreciation of children and children's insights in modern esotericism, where the old esoteric

metaphor of spiritual seekers as new children has taken on a new sound and new shades of meaning. In the globalized spiritual marketplace, holistic parenting centers, which carry on the practices developed in Aquaculture, are being implemented as successful, often family businesses. They also offer birth or family trips to exotic countries or are already located in the favorite places of New Age tourism – Goa, Thailand, Bali, the Egyptian diving resort of Dahabe, etc.

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## 161 The Resilience of a Guru

Monika Hirmer

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### Abstract

This presentation documents the resilience of a contemporary tantric Śrīvidyā tradition, practiced in the South Indian temple-complex Śaktipur. In particular, it illustrates some of the transformations in the ritual canon and spiritual leadership prompted by the recent passing on of Śaktipur's founder and guru, lovingly called Gurujī by his followers. While during my first visit to Śaktipur (2014) Gurujī was still alive, by the time I spent one year at the temple-complex (2017–18) as a researcher initiated into the tradition, Gurujī had left his body; most recently, I visited Śaktipur in 2024. Through an anthropological approach that spans over one decade, I could observe how the gradual sanitisation of rituals centred around bodily pleasure (*kaluācārā*) and the foregrounding of idol-worship (*dakṣiṇācāra*) on site is countered by strategies of resistance, including the establishment, by some of Gurujī's long-term followers, of new shrines upholding *kaulācārā* practices outside of Śaktipur. While Gurujī's teachings, featuring unconventional practices prominently besides mainstream ones, thus survive beyond the temple-complex, his legacy manifests in creative ways on site. Nishanth, one of Gurujī's long-term disciples, who happens to be also his adopted son and son-in-law, has recently started to be identified as a guru by aspiring disciples and to develop extra-sensorial faculties, such as clairvoyance and telepathy. Despite Nishanth's reluctance to embrace gurudom, he acknowledges that, lately, he feels that Gurujī is very much inside him. Differently from scholars suggesting that gurudom chiefly builds on a guru's efforts to legitimise their status as guru and secure a followership, I suggest that gurudom is a processual phenomenon, dependent on a multitude of beings worlding a certain being as guru. Nishanth's potential gurudom, therefore, is determined by the way in which Śaktipur's inhabitants and visitors, Devī and Nishanth, together, world the world and, concomitantly, Nishanth.