

The Esoteric Personal: Experience, Autobiography, and Personal Learning in the Study of Esoteric Practices

An Open Circle Seminar Workshop organized by Knut Graw and Kelly Hayes

SCHEDULE

July 1, 3-5 pm: Paul Stoller, Lili Di Puppò, Bernd Christian-Otto, Birgit Menzel
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3 pm Welcome – Organizers

3:30 - 5 pm Presenters

PAUL STOLLER - The Ethical Dimensions of Mistakes Made Along the Anthropological Path

LILI DI PUPPO - A "Novice" Muslim: Spirituality in the Small Gestures of Life

BERND CHRISTIAN-OTTO – The Finder's Course: Explorations from Within

BIRGIT MENZEL – Personal Reflections

GENERAL DISCUSSION – time permitting

July 2, 2:30 - 6pm: Steven Engler, Kelly Hayes, Oleg Yarosh, Monika Hirmer, Knut Graw

Session 1. 2:30 – 3:45 pm.

STEVEN ENGLER – Methodological (Atheist-Catholic) Agnosticism

KELLY HAYES – Street Walkers and Space Travellers: A Brazilian Journey

OLEG YAROSH – Fictive Kinship and the Borders of Ethnographic Enquiry

(break)

Session 2. 4:00 – 5:45 pm

MONIKA HIRMER - Personal Reflections

KNUT GRAW – Anthropological Epiphanies on the Non-Divided Self

GENERAL DISCUSSION

6:00 pm – dinner outside CAS-E (optional)

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Venue: CAS-E

Date: July 1 (3-5pm) and July 2, 2025 (2:30-6pm)

One thing connects how both outsiders and insiders perceive the esoteric realm: the sense that esoteric practices draw upon ideas about reality that somehow differ from what we experience in daily life. Esoteric practices seem to stand apart from other, more mundane realities, regardless of how society embeds or excludes them from a given sociocultural context or how individuals incorporate them into their lives. Because of this distinction, people find these practices fascinating or strange, attractive or worthy of resistance, seeing them as portraying important truths or dangerous illusions, depending on who observes them. What rarely occurs, however, is that people meet the realm of the esoteric with indifference.

With this complex range of attitudes towards the esoteric in mind, our workshop invites humanities and social science researchers to reflect upon their own engagement in the study of esoteric practices. We welcome scholars regardless of whether the term “esoteric” is common in your field, or how others perceive the political, religious, or epistemological status of your research topic.

We invite you to consider the following questions:

- What have you learned from studying esoteric practices, both professionally and personally?
- How has this research transformed your understanding of the social and cultural realities you initially set out to study?
- How has it changed your broader perception of sociocultural reality and academic inquiry?
- In what ways has it changed your relationship to your work, discipline, and vision for its future?
- What does it mean for you to study what you study and what personal meaning do you find in studying these subjects?
- Has researching esoteric practices changed you as a person, and if so, how?

Whether you have clear answers to these questions or are still exploring them, we invite you to share your personal journey with esoteric practices. Regardless of your scientific, religious, or other convictions, the Open Circle Seminar welcomes your contribution in a spirit of openness and scholarly exchange.