

## **The Esoteric Personal II**

### **The Esoteric Personal: Experience, Autobiography, and Personal Learning in the Study of Esoteric Practices, organized by Knut Graw and Kelly Hayes**

**VENUE:** CAS-E

**DATE:** January 13 and January 14, 2026

#### **DESCRIPTION**

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 Esoteric Personal-workshop welcomes your contribution in a spirit of openness and scholarly exchange.

## SCHEDULE

### Day 1: January 13, 2026 (Tuesday), 3-5 pm (sharp)

3 - 3:30 pm

- Welcome – Organizers

3:30 - 5 pm

- Michael Lackner, *Confessiones*
- Nestor Manichkin, Autoethnographic Experience: From Worldview Searches to Transcultural States
- GENERAL DISCUSSION

### Day 2: January 14, 2026 (Wednesday), 11 am – 1 pm (sharp)

- Robert LaFleur, The Mundane Bordering the Esoteric
- Lili Di Puppo, The *Tasbih* and the Smartphone
- Alex Stark, Encountering Worlds: Reflections on Fieldwork with Traditional Minangkabau and Malay Healers
- FINAL DISCUSSION

## **The Esoteric Personal 2 – abstracts**

Michael Lackner, *Confessiones* (no abstract available)

Nestor Manichkin, Autoethnographic Experience: From Worldview Searches to Transcultural States

In this presentation, I plan to highlight my personal experience, starting with my primary motivation, which was an attempt to reconcile a mythopoetic (or, more specifically, esoteric, spiritual) worldview with concepts from the humanities, and ending with a number of specific states of consciousness and experiences that were noted during my research work. As a working term, such states will be called transcultural by analogy with “bicultural dreams” (Barbara Tedlock). The report will conclude with an attempt to draw preliminary conclusions in the context of personal experience in creating a pluriversal worldview, using Friedrich Nietzsche's metaphor, who prescribed “looking at things through a hundred eyes in a multitude of faces.”

Robert LaFleur, The Mundane Bordering the Esoteric

One of the most startling realizations coming out of my fieldwork on the Chinese mountains has been how much of the (usually thirty-six hour) experience on and around the mountain is spent in mundane activity—much of which is connected to the tourism industry that shuttles “pilgrims” to the “village” at the foot of each mountain—as well as tactical decisions related to propitiation, ascending,

and descending the mountain. The mountains, as I like to say, are arenas for esoteric experience; to find them, however, travelers must leave the figurative "beaten path."

Lili Di Puppo, The Tasbih and the Smartphone

I will reflect on my daily use of two objects—the tasbih and the smartphone—to explore how I connect in different ways to something larger than myself, what I call the “big.” These two objects are, for me, two ways of connecting, but they also represent two different dimensions of my daily life and of how I navigate different modes of approaching reality. The tasbih connects me with eternity, while I experience the smartphone as both (human) connection and distraction. With the example of the tasbih, I will explore how eternity enters my life in micro-moments of attentiveness.

Alexander Stark, Encountering Worlds: Reflections on Fieldwork with Traditional Minangkabau and Malay Healers

This presentation reflects on my fieldwork experience among traditional Minangkabau and Malay healers. During the research, I encountered several challenges, including assistants who hindered the smooth collection of data. The study also revealed that the world of the dukun operates as a kind of parallel social realm, one that includes rivalries and even reports of magical attacks between practitioners. Some of the practices observed were considered ‘problematic’ according to local standards and raised ethical questions about the research process. There were two major types of healers: the dukun and healers who drew on Islamic sources. Affiliation with one group often led to reluctance or refusal to cooperate by the other. As the research progressed, my perspective gradually shifted. I came to realize that invisible entities played a significant role in local understandings of the world, and I personally witnessed phenomena that could not be explained through rational or positivist frameworks. These experiences prompted deeper reflection and led me to engage with anthropological literature on similar encounters. Over time, this led to a reorientation of my academic interests, and I was eager to learn more about healers and their worldview.