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Ethnographies of the Esoteric
Introducing Anthropological Methods and Theories to the Study of Contemporary Esotericism

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Abstract
In this article, we introduce the ContERN special issue on ethnographies of the esoteric. While the study of esotericism has been dominated by historical-philological scholarship, recent years have seen an increase in anthropological approaches to contemporary esotericism. We argue that this development provides the field not only with new tools, but also fresh perspectives on long-standing theoretical challenges. What are the implications of situating esotericism in particular ethnographic fieldsites? How does anthropological theory reflect on deep-rooted assumptions in the field? We address these questions using examples from the articles in the present special issue as well as other recent ethnographies of esoteric subject matter.

Keywords
Ethnography; the academic study of Western esotericism; rationality; colonialism; relativism; cultural theory

Introduction

From its inception as an academic specialisation in the 1990s, research on Western esotericism has been dominated by historical, philological, and, to a lesser extent, discursive methods.[1] While a range of different conceptualisations of esotericism have been proposed, it is usually seen as some kind of "special knowledge" which scholars encounter in texts.[2] Practices, bodies, objects, affects, and experiences are, of course, never explicitly denied,[3] but the prevailing view is that we can only sense them dimly, through the traces left by esoteric authors in writing.

There is currently a growing recognition that social scientific methods such as ethnography have much to offer this traditionally text-oriented field. As the study of contemporary esotericism is picking up speed, a small but growing body of work demonstrates this point.[4] Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (1989) was long the only detailed ethnographic study of a contemporary esoteric phenomenon, produced independently of the fledgling historical discipline. Recent years have, however, seen a number of new ethnographic studies appearing, such as Gerhard Mayer's *Arkane Welten* (2008),[5] built on interviews and fieldworks of ritual magicians in Germany, Kennet Granholm's *Dark Enlightenment* (2015), centered on fieldwork with the Swedish initiatory order Dragon Rouge, and a series of dissertations on topics ranging from "new age" spiritualities to contemporary ritual magic.[6]

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1 The classic statement on historical empiricism as the gold standard in research on esotericism is Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no .2 (1995). For discursive approaches, see especially Kennet Granholm, "Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes," *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013); but also Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 34 (2005).

2 Egil Asprem, "Reverse-Engineering 'Esotericism': How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 158–85.

3 "Experience" has always been a central, if problematic, category in the field, and the most recent textbook dignifies "practice" with its own chapter: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 102–18. However, neither of these categories have been sufficiently theorised or integrated into the overall understanding of "esotericism".

4 This started in 2012 with the formation of ContERN (the Contemporary Esotericism Research Network) and the first International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism at Stockholm University, and the publication in 2013 of Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, eds., *Contemporary Esotericism* (Sheffield: Equinox Publihing, 2013).

5 Gerhard Mayer, *Arkane Welten: Biografien, Erfahrungen und Praktiken zeitgenössischer Magier* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2008).

6 See, for example, Damon Z. Lycourinos, *Becoming the Magician* (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2015); Susannah Crockford, *After the American Dream: Spirituality and Political Economy in Northern Arizona* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Sciences,

With the present special issue we wish to highlight and promote the burgeoning ethnographic study of esotericism. We present three research articles, each based on an ethnography of one of the three classic *scientiae occultae*: alchemy, astrology, and ritual magic. In "Initiatory Materials", Olivia Cejvan reports on her ethnographic encounter with a spagyric alchemist in Sweden, focusing on the role that engagement with material substances in a laboratory setting plays in the apprentice relationship.[7] In "A Mercury Retrograde Kind of Day" we are taken to Sedona, Arizona, where Susannah Crockford's fieldwork reveals the everyday meanings and uses of astrology in "new age" spirituality.[8] Finally, Damon Z. Lycourinos's article analyses how solitary practitioners of ritual magic design rituals, deploy old and new magical texts, and develop internal and external gestures to produce what they report as phenomenologically realistic encounters with various entities.[9] Together, the papers demonstrate how the ethnographic approach gives access to dimensions of esoteric practice that would not be available through a strict textual focus alone, including how a practice is taught and learned in face-to-face interactions, how an individual ritual space is fashioned to manipulate one's sensory experience, and how abstract esoteric theory is shaped by the circumstances of everyday life.

In this introductory article, we will provide a prolegomena to the ethnographic study of esotericism. In addition to presenting the articles, we will introduce some classic problems in the anthropological literature that are of direct relevance to esotericism, before discussing the added benefits as well as the challenges that arise when we integrate anthropological research methods into the study of esotericism. We argue that integrating ethnographic research and engaging with anthropological theory is likely to challenge how we think about esotericism as a whole. More than just adding another tool to the toolbox, ethnographies of the esoteric stand to make novel contributions to the foundational debates of our field.

2017); and Manon Hedenborg-White, *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2017).

7 Olivia Cejvan, "Initiatory Materials: An Ethnography of Contemporary Alchemy in Sweden," *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018): 25–45.

8 Susannah Crockford, "A Mercury Retrograde Kind of Day: Exploring Astrology in Contemporary New Age Spirituality and American Social Life," *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018): 47–75.

9 Damon Z. Lycourinos, "Reflections on the Ethnographic Study of Western Esoteric Practices in Theory and Method," *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018): 77–107.

Starting Points: Esotericism in the Social Sciences

The academic study of esotericism has been a largely historical enterprise. Nevertheless, social scientific approaches to the field do exist, and some of these are of relevance to the emerging ethnographic literature. We may roughly distinguish three relevant social science programmes in previous research. First, a "sociology of the occult" emerged in the 1970s as an attempt to understand the apparent rise of interest in "the occult" and predict its significance for the future development of religion and secularisation in Western countries.[10] While this research is now generally considered a false start by historians of esotericism, it pioneered an approach to contemporary esotericism that looks not only at the content of its ideas, but also at its demographic distribution, group formations, and functions for individuals, groups, and even societies at large.[11]

Secondly, sociologists of new religious movements (NRMs) continue to have an interest in groups that fall under the esotericism rubric, albeit often without engaging the many historical studies and theoretical discussions spawned within the academic study of esotericism. Nevertheless, sociologically oriented studies of phenomena such as modern satanism,[12] the "New Age movement",[13] or "occulture"[14] provide the closest and most fruitful existing tie to date between esotericism and the social sciences.

Thirdly, there is significant overlap between "pagan studies" and esotericism. Unlike esotericism, pagan studies has a strong tradition of anthropological and sociological approaches, mixing historical research with quantitative analyses and ethnographic studies.[15] Some of this research has been criticised for its

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[10] See especially Edward Tiryakian, ed., *On the Margins of the Visible: Sociology, the Esoteric, and the Occult* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

[11] For a constructive reassessment of the programme's main achievements, see Egil Asprem, "On the Social Organisation of Rejected Knowledge: Reassessing the Sociology of the Occult," in *Western Esotericism and Deviance: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism*, ed. by Bernd-Christian Otto and Marco Pasi (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

[12] E.g. Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[13] E.g. Paul Heelas. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

[14] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, Two Volumes (London: T&T Clark International, 2004/2005).

[15] E.g. Graham Harvey. "Inventing Paganisms: Making Nature". In *Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. by Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis, 277–90 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Pagan studies also has its own journal, *The Pomegranate*, and special sessions at the annual American Academy of Religion meetings.

problematic mixture of scholarship and "pro-pagan" activism, which a future anthropology of esotericism should avoid.[16] Nevertheless, existing social scientific research on contemporary paganisms provide a valuable resource for the study of contemporary esotericism, both in terms of the results it has already gathered, and for the methodological challenges it has encountered.[17] To see these challenges more clearly, however, we should take a step back and consider how the method of ethnography is discussed within anthropology.

What Does Ethnography Entail? Views from the Field

Ethnography is a form of writing about cultures that is based on participant observation fieldwork in which the ethnographer lives among their subjects and tries as much as possible to live as they do.[18] As a qualitative social science methodology, ethnography produces data through a deep engagement with a specific location over a long duration.[19] The researcher will speak the language, engage in rituals, and learn the rhythms and flows of everyday life in their fieldsite. As such, ethnography is a useful addition to the interdisciplinary toolkit of methods available for exploring the various currents that comprise esotericism in the present. There are three specific qualities to ethnographic data — location, depth, and time — that can illuminate contemporary esotericism as it is currently practiced.

Location. Ethnographic data is *emplaced*, meaning that it is embedded in a specific social and cultural context. This context is often a delimited field-site, a place more or less arbitrarily defined by the ethnographer for the purpose of their study.[20] In esotericism, the focus on texts has created a canon, a list of authors who stand for esoteric subjects (so for Renaissance esotericism, we tend to talk about Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, for occultism, we tend to talk about Eliphas Lévi and Aleister Crowley, and so on). The

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16 See especially Markus Altena Davidsen, "What Is Wrong with Pagan Studies?," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (2012), 183–99.

17 See for example Amy Hale, "Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs. Esoteric Studies", *The Pomegranate* 15, nos. 1–2 (2013), 151–63.

18 George W. Stocking, *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

19 For recent discussion of how to define ethnography within anthropology, see Signe Howell, "Two or Three Things I Love about Ethnography," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (March 2017): 15–20; Alpa Shah, "Ethnography?," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (March 2017): 45–59; Paul Atkinson, *For Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2015).

20 Matei Candea, "Arbitrary Locations: In Defence of the Bounded Field-Site," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 13 (2007): 167–84.

contexts of these authors have traditionally been of secondary importance to the content of their texts: while content may be "contextualised" (related to and made sense of through contemporary events), the "specifically esoteric" usually remains in the driver's seat. This disembeds the work, isolating it from the wider culture of which it was a part. The historical and philological methodology which scholars of esotericism generally use presupposes this outcome: selection of relevant sources is based on some idea of historical continuity; a "lineage" that not only picks out the source as relevant to the history of esotericism, but also implicitly guides the scholar to look for specific elements in the text that constitute its esoteric status. Ethnography balances this view by highlighting the social context of esoteric subjects and by broadening the material available beyond canonical authors. In this issue, various locations of esoteric practices are explored: the UK, Sweden, and the USA. Each article provides detail on how the location interacts with the practice, granting a fine-grained depiction of esotericism as lived religion. In the future, ethnography should be employed to study esotericism beyond Western nations.

Depth. Typically what ethnographies offer is depth; a nuanced portrait of a specific social situation produced from long-term engagement with a field-site. While articles obviously do not offer as much depth as full-length monographs, the ethnographies produced here do provide a rich variety of ethnographic material. Significantly, each of the articles engages with individual practitioners, rather than with a group of people, which is more often the case in ethnography. Esotericism appears as a solitary practice, pursued separately from their peer groups, jobs, and family. This appears to reflect the often highly individualised nature of esoteric practice today. However, the papers include examples of connections to wider networks — astrologers making a living from their readings, ritual magicians socialising together online and in person, alchemists offering tutorials and classes. The papers offer a view of how esoteric practice is integrated into the everyday lives of those who pursue it.

Time. Given its deep engagement with a specific location, ethnography is limited in its temporal scope. It is a description of a certain time period: when the ethnographer was in their fieldsite. It does not produce data that can be generalised to whole populations; it is illustrative rather than representative of broader social trends. This defined temporality is known in anthropology as "the ethnographic moment". In early literature from the discipline, monographs were written in the present tense to stretch this moment beyond its confines, suggesting that how the ethnographer encountered a group in the field was how they always were. This synchronic view has been balanced with

an appreciation of history and the limits to the ethnographic moment in more recent literature.[21] The already rich literature on the history of esotericism could be fruitfully complemented with ethnographic descriptions of the contemporary. The papers in this issue, for example, reveal how technology has been thoroughly incorporated into esoteric practice. Computer programmes calculate the complex equations on behalf of American astrologers so they no longer have to "do the math" themselves. British magicians coordinate and participate in rituals over Skype. In Sweden, alchemists make their spagyric lore available on free-to-download pdfs.

Ethnographic material reveals quotidian details; it is necessarily an intimate view of ordinary life. This can raise practical problems when applied to studying esotericism. Access is a perennial issue for ethnographers: becoming an insider of secret or occult groups can make this issue even more fraught. Kennet Granholm had to be initiated into the Dragon Rouge in order to study the "left-hand path", which, paradoxically, entailed vows of secrecy for aspects of the order's rituals.[22] Moreover, gaining access to some groups can mean losing access to others. Lycourinos's article in the present issue engages with this problem in depth, examining how he was able to position himself as an acceptable co-participant to practitioners of ritual magic in the UK, using his previous non-academic work as a route into the milieu.

Such close engagement can, however, be problematic. Anthropology's one mortal sin is for ethnographers to "go native": to become what they are only supposed to be studying. Contemporary Western shamanism was born from the work produced by anthropologists who "went native": Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner.[23] In esotericism, scholars are also wary of being too closely associated with the subjects studied, trying to avoid the drawbacks of earlier "religionist" scholarship and the negative publicity that can come from being too closely associated with certain groups. Here, the debates about acceptable levels of engagement in the field of pagan studies may provide a useful backdrop for ethnographers of esotericism.

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[21] Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[22] Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 117–23.

[23] Susannah Crockford, "Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience," *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010), 139–58; Robert Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies, and Contemporary Pagans* (London: Routledge, 2003).

The Promises and Pitfalls of Ethnography: Lessons from the Anthropological Record

Anthropology is the study of contemporary peoples and cultures. Traditionally, anthropologists have sought out fieldsites in non-Western cultures; from its inception, anthropology was the study of people in "exotic", far away places, at the frontiers of the colonial empires. Bronislaw Malinowski is widely considered to have instituted participant observation fieldwork; his fieldsite was the Trobriand Islands, off the coast of Papua New Guinea.[24] This is perhaps one historical reason for the gap between anthropology and esotericism. Anthropology studied the "non-West", while esotericism was "Western".

This situation is, however, changing in both disciplines. Anthropologists regularly study Western cultures, while esotericism no longer restricts itself to Western culture.[25] Indeed, an ongoing concern in both the social sciences and humanities is the self-reflexive critique of "the West". What are its boundaries? What does this category really capture? What power relations are invoked when we use it?[26] Ethnography and esotericism have both been concerned with the "exotic", in one sense or another: things that seemed strange, marginal, or occult. Subjects like witchcraft, divination, and magic have been important topics in anthropology

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[24] George W. Stocking, *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison, WI.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

[25] Recent examples of anthropologists using ethnography to study esotericism in Western cultures include Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), and Susan Lepselter, *Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016). The forthcoming ethnography by Alireza Doodstar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), looks at esotericism in a non-Western context from an anthropological perspective. For other studies of esotericism in non-Western contexts see Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014); Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, eds., *Occultism in a Global Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2014); Hugh Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Birgit Menzel, "The Occult Underground of Late Soviet Russia," *Aries* 13, no. 2 (2013): 269–88; Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[26] In esotericism research, this debate was opened in print by Kennet Granholm, "Locating the West: Problematizing the 'Western' in Western Esotericism and Occultism," in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. by Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (London: Routledge, 2014), 17–36. It has been followed up, notably, by Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33; and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 3 (2015): 55–91.

for a long time. Likewise, esotericism brought the presence of these subjects in a Western context to the fore, helping to broaden the scope of religious studies beyond canonised theologies and exclusivist concerns for "world religions". In doing so, esotericism research has added to academia's ongoing self-examination by showing that what was assumed to be marginal and exotic has been present at the heart of modern, enlightened, and secular society all along; its rhetorical exclusion was part of historically situated constructions of authority, rationality, and truth.[27] These constructions are, moreover, central to the cultural definition of "the West" and the epistemic and practical power that the category continues to wield.

Rationality in the Field

Interrogating the concept of "rationality" has, for these reasons, been central to anthropologists and esotericism scholars alike. Two of the articles in this special issue take on the concept of rationality through reference to the work of anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard. Cejvan's article on alchemy engages with the risk of corruption of the ethnographer through coming into contact with the irrational. Crockford's article about astrology looks at how oracles and divination provide an explanatory model of misfortune. Both of these ideas stem from Evans-Pritchard's work on witchcraft among the Azande of Central Africa, which is seminal in the study of heterodox religious practices. Writing in the 1930s, European intellectuals still dismissed people such as the Azande as "savages" and saw their religion as heretical superstition to be "fixed" through education in the ways of Western civilisation, which was being violently imposed by the colonial governments of the time. It was therefore an important concern for Evans-Pritchard to explain the ordinariness of witchcraft in Azande society. Witchcraft was an everyday occurrence, spoken of by all, and was by no means seen as strange, marginal, or occult. Going further than this, he explained it in terms of a "social fact", with the implication that witchcraft was rational because it fit within the particular internal cultural logic of Azande society.[28] This was a powerful claim to make at the time, one that argued for an intellectual coherence of those considered pre-logical, childlike, or worse.

Evans-Pritchard's theoretical innovation was to suggest that witchcraft was a theory of causation, a "second spear" where the objective cause of misfortune was known, but could not be socially acted upon. Witchcraft provided the why of causation, which could be socially acted upon, most often meaning that vengeance could be sought against the alleged perpetrator of witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard

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[27] See especially Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[28] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 25.

used the comparison of Western law and morality to illustrate that this is not a naive peculiarity of the Azande: "We accept scientific explanations of the causes of disease, and even of the causes of insanity, but we deny them in crime and sin because here they militate against law and morals which are axiomatic."[29] What appears rational in one context may appear irrational in another. Ethnography rigorously examines and problematises that which is taken to be axiomatic in social life, holding it up and asking why such things appear to be "natural" when they are partial and cultural. In other words, social contexts demand social explanations.

Bodies and Minds

The problem with this theoretical approach is that it easily veers into cultural relativism. Arguing that different societies have their own particular cultural logics potentially reifies such difference, and falls into the same trap of logical contradiction as other forms of relativism. Moreover, relativism has problematic implications for questions of social change, cultural contact, and colonialism, and the shared material conditions of human embodied life. In his spirited denunciation of cultural relativism, Dan Sperber argued for what he called a "naturalistic" or "rationalist" approach to culture.[30] In doing so, he coined the term "apparently irrational beliefs", which he illustrated with the memorable example of an informant from the Druze in Ethiopia, whom he considered otherwise rational and cogent, affirming that a gold dragon lived just over a nearby hill. Sperber wanted to reconcile his respect for his informant with the "knowledge that such a belief is absurd".[31] He proposed categorising such statements as representational beliefs, contrasted with factual beliefs, and analysing their content in terms of their propositional or semi-propositional nature. A gold dragon is a representation of something else, something objective and natural. In the case of Sperber's Druze informant, the story of the gold dragon expressed an old man's desire for the wealth and glory that came from a successful big game hunt.[32]

Sperber's "epidemiological" approach to culture, which examines how representations spread and mutate in populations of human minds, has come to typify the cognitive turn in anthropology.[33] Its focus on how human attention, memory, and learning mechanisms influence the spread and significance

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29 Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, 27.

30 Dan Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge: Three Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

31 Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge*, 35.

32 Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge,* 61.

33 Sperber, *Explaining Culture,* 3.

attributed to certain representations has also played a formative role in the cognitive science of religion (CSR).[34] This interdisciplinary approach to the full range of phenomena commonly related to "religion" (such as rituals, beliefs, worldviews, morality, social bonds, group identity, etc.) typically combines data gathered from fieldwork[35] with experimental research,[36] sometimes attempting to bring the lab to the fieldsite.[37] The work of bringing these promising CSR approaches to the study of esotericism has only just begun.[38] Its future success will depend not only on developing plausible naturalistic theories and testable hypotheses for esoteric phenomena, but also on recruiting and training capable anthropologists and fieldworkers of the contemporary esoteric.

The Ontological Turn

The theoretical focus in anthropology has recently shifted towards what is called "the ontological turn". Thinkers in this trend posit that their informants inhabit different worlds, not different representations of the same world, or "worldviews".[39] In terms of esoteric subjects, Martin Holbraad's work on

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[34] E.g. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

[35] Such as Emma Cohen, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); or Harvey Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[36] E.g., of experiences and attributions: Marc Andersen et al., "Agency Detection in Predictive Minds: A Virtual Reality Study," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (2017); of transmission of cultural representations: Justin L. Barrett, "Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness in Religious Concepts: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20 (2008); or of the processing of action sequences in rituals: Kristoffer L. Nielbo and Jesper Sørensen, "Spontaneous Processing of Functional and Non-Functional Action Sequences," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 1, no. 1 (2011).

[37] E.g. Dimitris Xygalatas et al. "Autobiographical Memory in a Fire-walking Ritual," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 13, nos. 1–2 (2013): 1–16.

[38] See Asprem, "Reverse-Engineering 'Esotericism'". See also contributions to the 2017 special issue of *Aries* on "Esotericism and the Cognitive Science of Religion": Egil Asprem and Markus Altena Davidsen, "Editors' Introduction: What Cognitive Science Offers the Study of Esotericism," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 1–15; Egil Asprem, "Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 17–50; Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, "Indices in the Dark: Towards a Cognitive Semiotics of Western Esotericism, Exemplified by Crowley's *Liber AL*," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 51–80; April D. DeConick, "Soul Flights: Cognitive Ratcheting and the Problem of Comparison," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 81–118; Jesper Sørensen, "Western Esotericism and Cognitive Science of Religion," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 119–35.

[39] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The Relative Native", *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013): 473–502; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad,

Afro-Cuban divination is the most relevant, although it draws from the rich anthropological literature on divination rather than the historical work of the academic study of esotericism. Holbraad focuses on the statement by Ifá diviners that the white powder that *babalawos* use as part of their rituals is identified with the power to read the oracles provided by the gods: "powder *is* power".[40] The powder does not represent power, it *is* power. However, Holbraad makes clear that there is no confusion between power and powder, but that a "clear logical connection" is made between the concept of power and the "thing" (the preferred term for objects in this literature) or artefact of powder. The stated aim is to challenge the a priori assumptions of rationalistic science which dismiss the idea of powder having any inherent divinatory power. This destabilises the notion that the ethnographer "knows better" than their informant how the latter's social reality is constituted. In proposing the ontological turn, Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell made the bold claim to change the conceptualisation of "things" and "concepts" as separate entities that are then related in some way.[41] Rather, they argue that things and concepts are mutually constitutive through the logical connections that people make between them.

The invocation of a "clear logical connection" between power and powder that is, in fact, only clear to Ifá diviners and which Holbraad must explain to outsiders using lengthy and complex ethnographic theory suggests the extent to which the ontological approach has returned to the same premise that Evans-Pritchard advanced: cultural relativism.[42] Despite stating that they want to move away from simplistic declarations that different people in different places do things differently, the ontological turn hinges so closely on human subjectivity and variability that it takes anthropology full circle, returning to the beginnings of ethnographic theory.

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and Sari Wastell, eds., *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007); Michael W. Scott, "The Anthropology of Ontology (Religious Science?)", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 4 (December 2013): 859–72.

[40] Martin Holbraad, "The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or *Mana*, Again)", in *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. by Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 204–5.

[41] Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, "Introduction: Thinking through Things." In *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. by Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 6–7.

[42] This critique is also made by anthropologist David Graeber in his response to Viveiros de Castro, see "Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying 'Reality': A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro", *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2015): 1–41.

Cultural Theory and the Study of Esotericism

Anthropology seems to have difficulty moving beyond its oscillation between relativistic and universalistic explanations. Meanwhile, cultural analyses of any type have been rare in the study of esotericism. This has not only left the particular implications of what we mean by "Western" in Western esotericism unexamined, but also prevented a serious reflection on what the specific, local culture of "esotericism" is in any given case. What implications do the cultural contexts in which esoteric subjects are embedded have on the ways those subjects are worked out in practice? This is the central question that the articles in this special issue seek to address.

The term "magic" is often applied to a complex of practices marked off as "other" from a progressive and secular Western perspective. In the history of esotericism, however, magic is also a term of inclusion, used to refer to one's own practices.[43] Lycourinos's article illustrates how a process of disembedding practices of ritual magic from their historical contexts and re-embedding them grants practitioners a form of legitimacy in their self-identification as magicians. This process of self-construction inverts a modernist Western identity based on a hegemonic status of rationalistic science as form of knowledge and of knowing. It posits that there are other ways to know, and that these can go beyond rationalistic science, which then becomes the limited form of knowledge restricted to the strictly empirical domain of objectivity. In Cejvan's paper, the importance of *learning* a practice in order to engage with it as a form of knowing is explored: for the alchemists in Sweden that she studies there are subtle gradients that can only be encountered with direct experience of producing the elixirs. Both Lycourinos and Cejvan highlight ethnography as a methodology for learning about esotericism beyond what is accessible through texts. The interest in how different forms of knowledge and of knowing are constructed and maintained unites the study of Western esotericism and anthropology. Ethnographic methods are a way of examining these forms of knowing, granting access to embodied, affective, and phenomenological aspects of knowledge construction that are not readily available through text alone.

Lived Esotericism

Lived religion is often quite different from the way in which it is described and promoted in its textual corpus.[44] While some religions take great pains to ensure strict adherence to scripture, others reject the importance and significance of texts.

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[43] For a broad overview, see Bernd-Christian Otto, "Historicizing 'Western Learned Magic'", *Aries* 16, no. 2 (2016).

[44] See e.g. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Even when scripture is emphasised and "correct belief" policed, believers tend to improvise in ways that violate the "theologically correct" in practical situations.[45] Ethnography is the key method for bringing these tensions to the fore, studying religion not simply as it is mandated or idealised but as it really happens. This, in turn, has implications for theorisation, as scholars of lived religion have argued for decades.[46] The same holds for "lived esotericism": by going beyond the study of "counter-canonic" esoteric texts, it is, for example, possible to glimpse forms of esotericism that are not marked primarily by "rejected knowledge", the search for "higher knowledge", or a Faivrean "form of thought". Glimpses into how esoteric practice is embedded in everyday life would offer new insights, and, potentially, reformulations of theory.

There are, however, important distinctions to highlight between the two disciplines' approaches to theory. The separation of emic and etic interpretations is important in esotericism, as it is in the discipline of religious studies more widely. The emic/etic distinction is, however, often confused with the insider/outsider problem: reconstructing the emic interpretations of religious "insiders" is thus viewed not simply as an integral part of the research process, but is often contrasted, in vaguely polemical terms, with the "proper", etic interpretations of the "outsider" scholar. The historical reasons for this are that a previous generation of "religionist" scholars tended to ignore the methodological distinction altogether and produced works that may best be characterised as new esoteric interpretations in their own right. Religionism has been esotericism research's own "going native" problem.

A related concern is the emphasis on definitions: do scholars accept insiders' definitions of what they do or do they construct their own analytic definitions that may be contrary to self-descriptions? As an outcome of this concern, there have been long, often fraught, debates over the meaning of "religion", and how it is theorised.[47] In anthropology this is not so much of an issue. Ethnography describes the emic and contextualises it, by socially embedding the normative terms that people use; theory is produced from this effort. Analytic definitions are consequently less frequently contested among scholars because anthropologists tend not to universalise their findings. The

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[45] E.g. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[46] E.g. Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); cf. McGuire, *Lived Religion.*

[47] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Entanglements: Marking Place in the Field of Religion* (London: Equinox, 2014); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003).

question for anthropologists is not how to define "religion" as such, it is how to describe how "religion" was defined by their informants and what consequences this had in their particular fieldsite. An increased sensitivity to the actors' categories, especially as deployed "live" in the field, is important for getting a better idea about how practitioners in what scholars a priori consider "esoteric" currents really construct their identities. Crockford's article in the present issue exemplifies this by showing how her informants reject the label "new age" and prefer the term "spirituality".

Global Transmission, Local Contexts: Ethnography and the Future of Theorising Esotericism

Debates over the delimitation of the discipline have been particularly persistent in esotericism research. This is perhaps to be expected in a relatively new discipline; however, it could be argued that such debates have achieved little resolution and amount to an epistemological "identity crisis". What *is* esotericism? Why bother to study it? Do we need to define esotericism? Hanegraaff's theory of esotericism as a "wastebasket" category is currently paradigmatic in this debate.[48] In grouping together "all those traditions in Western culture that had been rejected by rationalist and scientific thinkers" since the Enlightenment as well as Protestant thinkers since the Reformation, this delimitation of the field is explicitly Western, historical, and marked by negation.[49] In order to engage with contemporary practices, and especially those flourishing beyond the West, we need additional theoretical resources.[50]

Ethnographies indicate the extent to which contemporary peoples are using esotericism as a form of self-designation, and in the process, turning it into something positive, crafting new "traditions" to suit their interests. A recent special issue of *Ethnos* brings together cross-cultural studies that explore the intersection of "new age" spirituality and emotional pedagogies. For example, Sonya Pritzker reveals how in contemporary China, "new age" is being merged

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48 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy.*

49 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism," in *Religion: Secret Religion*, ed. by April D. DeConick (New York: Macmillan, 2016), 155–70; see also Olav Hammer, "Deconstructing 'Western Esotericism': On Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy,*" *Religion* 43, no. 2 (April 2013): 241–51; Bernd-Christian Otto, "Discourse Theory Trumps Discourse Theory: Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy,*" *Religion* 43, no. 2 (April 2013): 231–40; Michael Stausberg,"What Is It All about? Some Reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy*", *Religion* 43, no. 2 (April 2013): 219–30.

50 See e.g. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism"; Asprem, "Beyond the West"; Asprem and Granholm, "Introduction", in *Contemporary Esotericism,* ed. by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publihing, 2013).

with psychotherapy to explore emotions and personhood through the concept of the "inner child".[51] Dalit Simchai and Avihu Shoshana look at the singular status of anger and the strategies employed to deal with it among spiritual groups in Israel.[52] Hypnosis has recently gained widespread popularity in Indonesia, transforming in the process to a novel form of self-hypnosis, as explored by Nick Long.[53] These studies shed light on the transmission and transformation of a form of contemporary esotericism ("new age") as it spreads around the world, connecting to potentially become a "global" spirituality. It is particularly relevant to study such transformations through ethnography, as it can reveal how contemporary esotericism is evolving and changing in practice, and interrogate in detail how it is embedded in local culture. This is all the more important when we are dealing with a form of spirituality in which texts are often treated as less authoritative or important than physical practice, intuition, and a personal gnosis.

The idea that new age spirituality is a global phenomenon would need further exploration in a different forum. For now, it points to the question of *universalism*. In all major theorisations in the field, esotericism is a product of "Western", more specifically "Western European", culture. Yet, as also mentioned briefly above, scholars do talk about esotericism in non-Western contexts. The current paradigm implies that non-Western esotericism can be explored in terms of *transcultural transmission*: colonialist entanglements, globalisation, cultural exports through market mechanisms, popular culture, and migration of people let "originally Western" ideas and practices travel from one place to another.[54] However, as cognitive anthropology has shown, the successful adaptation of cultural elements in a new context hinges on local adopters recognising the new element as *relevant* in view of the existing cultural context.[55] One way in which relevance is determined is by perceiving the new element as *analogous* to some existing element. We only have to look at how Europeans adopted and adapted concepts such as "karma", "yoga", or "chakra" through Western lenses to see this in practice. In reverse, we must recognise that resulting categories like "esoteric Buddhism", are not merely "projections" of

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[51] Sonya E. Pritzker, "New Age with Chinese Characteristics? Translating Inner Child Emotion Pedagogies in Contemporary China," *Ethos* 44, no. 2 (June 2016): 150–70.

[52] Dalit Simchai and Avihu Shoshana, "The Ethic of Spirituality and the Non-Angry Subject," *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (March 2018): 115–33.

[53] Nicholas J. Long, "Suggestions of Power: Searching for Efficacy in Indonesia's Hypnosis Boom," *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (March 2018): 70–94.

[54] This is the underlying premise of, e.g, Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism"; and Bogdan and Djurdjevic, eds., *Occultism in a Global Perspective*.

[55] Sperber, *Explaining Culture*, 113–18.

the Western mind (in this case via Theosophy), but rather entangled, intercultural categories that succeed in establishing themselves in a population because people are able to successfully use the concept to make sense of existing phenomena in their environments. This emphatically does *not* mean that we should look for a "universal esotericism" underlying these local "manifestations" which are now "discovered" through comparison. We should, however, be mindful that the bodily, cognitive, and social building blocks from which all human practices are crafted operate irrespective of any particular culture (e.g., the capacity for language is independent of the particular language Mandarin Chinese), thus accounting for some degree of convergence of social and cultural forms across populations.[56] Focusing on how the building blocks of, for example, hierarchical initiations, kataphatic uses of the imagination, or correspondence thinking constrain and guide the diffusion of "Western" esoteric elements to other cultural contexts is thus a promising line for comparative studies.[57]

The existing ethnographic record may sharpen our focus on the role of shared cognitive building blocks and culturally specific forms of categorisation in producing "esoteric" phenomena. To return to one of the examples provided above, Azande witchcraft shares many characteristics with European esotericism. Evans-Pritchard even makes clear that, like esotericism, it is a rejected, marginal discourse from the perspective of Western-rooted scholarship; however, it was an ordinary and accepted element of life among the Azande. Holbraad's discussion of Afro-Cuban divination equally makes explicit that it is the analytical gaze of modernist science that marginalises the Ifá oracles.

Monotheism is an important difference between societies like the Azande and the Yoruba (in which Ifá originated prior to being spread through the transatlantic slave trade to Cuba) and those in which esotericism has typically been studied. Jan Assman's "Mosaic distinction" is perhaps a useful analytic tool in thinking through the implications of this suggestion.[58] The framing of a true/false dichotomy as fundamental to monotheism as it took hold in the "Abrahamic" theologies indicates how esotericism is produced. When a dominant religious tradition claims a singular purchase to truth about divinity, cosmology, and salvation, heterodoxy becomes intolerable heresy. The rejected will then tend to move inward; becoming the hidden, inner explorations that

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56 Cf. Asprem, "Reverse-Engineering 'Esotericism.'"

57 See Asprem, "On the Necessity of Comparisons: A Call for Hypothesis-Driven Research on Esotericism," in *Western Esotericism and the East*, ed. by Anita Stasulane and Birgit Menzel (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

58 Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

have often characterised esotericism. Hanegraaff's central argument is that this was a polemical construction created by Enlightenment and Protestant thinkers during a specific period of history in western Europe.[59] If this argument is accepted, it would follow that esotericism is a specifically "Western", moreover, Western European, phenomenon.

An important aspect of the rejected knowledge model that deserves more attention, however, is the role of colonialism.[60] The European colonial empires aggressively expanded across the globe, seizing resources and territory for their own enrichment. In the process, they exported and, often, violently imposed their cultural and religious norms. This situation continues into recent history, and arguably to the present day. When discussing Evans-Pritchard's study on the Azande, for example, it must be remembered why he was in central Africa. It was not exclusively to benefit an objective scientific study, even if that was the self-conscious identification that Evans-Pritchard himself promoted. He was supported by a British university and allowed to be in British-controlled Sudan by the colonial authorities. They were interested in his and other anthropologists' research in order to use it to help subjugate and "civilise" the populations that came under their rule.[61] These populations were polemicised against as irrational, pagan "others" in a similar way to esoteric trends at home. This dynamic continues, even though colonial institutions have for the most part been disassembled. What Holbraad is trying to point out through the theory of other "worlds" is that, if we continue to "explain" the difference of others in different contexts through reference to categories born from modernist science, we are still perpetuating colonial power relations because they, too, were part of the imperialist project.

The continued operation of imperial power needs to be critically examined not only reflexively by scholars, but also in terms of how it affects the expression of esoteric practice. If new age spirituality, for example, is travelling across the globe, what cultural baggage is coming along with it? The valorisation of individualism in new age spirituality suggests the influence of neoliberal ideology.[62] Emphasising self-reliance is a way of naturalising a political economic project —

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[59] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy,* 373–74.

[60] Colonialism was for all practical purposes absent from his 2012 book, but features prominently in Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism".

[61] The critique of anthropology as the handmaiden of colonialism is well-known within the discipline and discussed at length in Talal Asad, "Introduction," in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter,* ed. by Talal Asad (New York: Humanity Books, 1973), 9–20.

[62] Boaz Huss, "Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and Its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 1 (2014): 47–60.

removing the social safety nets of the welfare state. "Self-help" and "self-care" are not neutral discourse; they encourage acceptance of particular political and economic projects through the sacralisation of individuality and by attributing responsibility solely to the self. Examining contemporary esotericism requires a serious engagement with the ways that esotericism is not only a marginalised victim of history, but itself plays a role in legitimising dominant ideologies (e.g. neoliberalism) and reifying global power asymmetries. Indeed, in a time when alterity is easily converted into cultural (and political and economic) capital, the self-understanding of many esoteric systems as having been suppressed, rejected, or persecuted (see, e.g., the notion of "the burning times" popular among some Wiccans) by dogmatic and materialist elites is, ironically, a perfect market pitch for the spiritual entrepreneur. The proliferation of practitioners claiming "indigenous" cultural heritage for their own profit can be read cynically as the working out of late capitalism in a crowded spiritual marketplace.[63]

The obverse of this concern is exploring the ways in which esotericism, after all, remains part of subaltern discourses. Does it form part of the language of resistance and rebellion to the hegemony of "Western civilisation"? Eduard ten Houten's analysis of Chechen jihadist Shamil Basayev's appropriation of "new age" author Paulo Coelho's *Manual of the Warrior of Light* is a fascinating example of how esotericism can be transformed to fit particular political purposes — in this case violent opposition to the Russian state.[64] The histories of esotericism are multiple, as are the social contexts through which it is transmitted in the contemporary world. Ethnographies of the esoteric are necessary not only to untangle the cultural webs that give it its often highly specific local meanings, but also as a theoretical bulwark against assuming that its cultural status (marginal, elite, underground, deviant) is inherent and stable.

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[63] Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality," *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2000): 329–52; Alice Beck Kehoe, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2000); Guy Redden, "The New Age: Towards a Market Model," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 2 (2005): 231–46.

[64] Eduard ten Houten, "New Age Spirituality and Islamic Jihad: Paulo Coelho's Manual of the Warrior of Light and Shamil Basayev's Manual of the Mujahid," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publihing, 2013), 265–86.

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