

Ancient Wisdoms for Modern Times

Analysing Contemporary Challenges through the Lens of Tantra and Shamanism

**SOAS, University of London, BG 01, Brunei Gallery
20th and 21st April 2023, 9:30am–5:30pm**

In collaboration with:
**European Association for South Asian Studies
SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies
Lyon Catholic University**

Convenors:
Dr Monika Hirmer and Dr Fabio Armand

Presenters:

Prabhavati Reddy - George Mason University, Virginia, USA
Stefano Beggiora - University Ca' Foscari, Venezia, Italy
James Mallinson - SOAS, University of London, UK
Lidia Guzy - University College Cork, Ireland
William Sax - Heidelberg University, Germany
Annette Hornbacher - Heidelberg University, Germany
Ruth Westoby - SOAS, University of London, UK
Lubomír Ondračka - Charles University, Prague,
Richard David Williams - SOAS, University of London, UK
Fabio Armand - Lion University, France
Monika Hirmer - SOAS, University of London, UK

Workshop description:

South Asian tantric and shamanic traditions revolve largely around rituals aimed at harnessing transcendental powers. Such powers allow tantric practitioners not only to pursue liberation (*mokṣa*) but, importantly, also enable them to influence worldly affairs, similarly to shamans. Thus far, empowerment and divinisation rituals have mostly been studied in view of practitioners' love interests (Golovkova 2020), the recognition of one's true self (Timalsina 2007), merging with a venerated deity (Khanna 2016), and their impact on gender relations (Biernacki 2007). The majority of such studies is text-based and concentrates on tantric traditions of the past, ignoring their intertwining with other practices related to shamanisms and folk religions (Acri and Rosati 2022).

With the workshop 'Ancient Wisdoms for Modern Times' we wish to expand current scholarship and observe the relevance of South Asian esoteric practices to contemporary times—not only in view of practitioners' personal contexts but, significantly, in relationship to urgent collective challenges. At a time when dominant positivistic outlooks driven by competition and growth are failing to address the problems that the world at large and its inhabitants face, we intend to shift our attention to epistemic and cosmological realities that transcend mainly anthropocentric, dichotomous existential frameworks, in order to explore how these engage with complex contemporary issues.

Since tantric and shamanic knowledge systems are far from extinct and, moreover, have traditionally been actively applied to practitioners' everyday lives and worldly matters in general (as opposed to being relegated to otherworldly, philosophical domains), they constitute resources that ought to be considered when confronting contemporary worldly challenges of both personal and collective nature. Having thus far rarely been acknowledged in this light within academic literature, we propose to study tantric and shamanic practices, and the cosmologies they are embedded in, in relation to predicaments such as the current ecological crisis, pandemic outbreaks, conflicts of various nature, the perseverance of patriarchal dominance and other exploitative relationships, and the rise of mental health issues. Significantly, colonialism and the geo-political power discrepancies ensuing therefrom have exposed South Asia exponentially to some of these problematics, rendering the exclusion of indigenous knowledge systems from scholarly discourses around their overcoming unjustified.

The workshop 'Ancient Wisdoms for Modern Times' will gather both senior and early career scholars from a variety of disciplines—spanning anthropology, neurocognitive sciences, area studies, psychology, religious studies and gender studies—and espousing various methodological approaches—including participant observation, ethnography, textual analysis and historical analysis. In addition to being transdisciplinary, the workshop will bring together scholars from various positionalities—crossing the boundaries between observers and practitioners—and geographies.



Centre of Yoga Studies

Programme

Day 1, 20th April:

- 9:30-10:00: Arrival
- 10:00-10:30: Welcome
- 10:30-11:30: Keynote (**GENDER**):
Prabhavati Reddy: Intersections between Folk and Tantric goddesses and Women's role in Contemporary South Asian Practices
- 11:30-12:00: Tea
- 12:00-12:45: **GENDER**:
Lidia Guzy: Ecstatic Encounters with the Divine - Gurumai's shamanic songs from Koraput
- 12:45-14:00: Lunch
- 14:00-16:30: **BODY & ELEMENTS**:
Lubomír Ondračka: How to change the world? Tantric manipulation of the gross elements
Ruth Westoby: Body and cosmos in early *haṭha* yoga
James Mallinson: The Dangers of Yoga
- 16:30-17:00: Tea + gathering

Day 2, 21st April:

- 9:30-10:00: Arrival, tea
- 10:00-12:30: **TEXTS & PRACTICES**:
Annette Hornbacher: The invention of Balinese 'tantra': Esoteric text practices between salvation and manipulation
William Sax: Looking Forward and Looking Back: Tantra and Veda
Richard David Williams: Muslim Mantras, Commercial Tantra, and Self-Help Books, c. 1870–1930
- 12:30-14:00: Lunch
- 14:00-16:30: **ECOLOGY**:
Stefano Beggiora: On the Trail of the Tigers: Approaches to Multispecies Ethnography in India
Fabio Armand: Into the wildlands. Shamanic initiations on the border of wilderness among Eastern Gurung
Monika Hirmer: Have we ever been human? Of Śrīvidyā, Sentient Environments and Anthropocentric Deviations
- 16:30-17:30: Round table, tea
- 17:30-17:45: Thanks

Abstracts

Prabhavati Reddy – Keynote Speaker

Intersections between Folk and Tantric goddesses and Women's role in Contemporary South Asian Practices

My keynote speech explores some parallels, complexities and challenges in relation to folk and tantric goddesses entrenched with distinctive cultural meanings in different geographical settings of the Indian subcontinent. I examine the ways in which women engage with worship, rituals and festivals of Hindu goddesses and play an active role for the continuity of living traditions in contemporary times.

The issues of establishing and preserving the relationship of longstanding (ancient) and changing (modern) traditions are explored since the former (understanding of roots) represents static points of view and the latter (contemporary) embody dynamic viewpoints in shifting environments.

This keynote talk aims to raise the awareness of interplay between past and present-day traditions and practices and encourages participants to engage in discussions on challenges faced in exploring indigenous knowledge based cultural and religious systems.

Bio: Prabhavati C. Reddy (Ph.D., Harvard University) is an erudite scholar and adjunct professor of Indian philosophies and religious traditions in the Department of Religious Studies, George Mason University, Virginia, USA. She is the author of *Hindu Pilgrimage: Shifting patterns of worldview of Srisailam in South India* and several articles on Hindu temples, art and Bathukamma. Her book on *Tantra, Siddha and Yoga Traditions, A Transregional Natha sampradaya in medieval South India* will be published in 2024. She has translated numerous chapters, poems and songs from Sanskrit and Telugu to English. Dr. Reddy has lectured at universities in America, U.K. and India as well as presented papers at professional conferences.

Lidia Guzy

Ecstatic Encounters with the Divine - Gurumai's shamanic songs from Koraput

This paper presents insights into the shamanic culture of Koraput, Odisha. Female ecstatic ritual trance specialists – gurumai - fall regularly into ritual trance to encounter local gods and goddesses and to deal with the queries and sorrows of their believers in the tribal Desya context of Odisha.

The paper presents and discusses the empowering, transformative and transgressive elements of the ritual trance of gurumai who heals with her voice, her sounds and songs and with the wisdom of her ritual practice.

Bio: Dr hab. Lidia Guzy is an anthropologist, scientist of religions and South Asia expert. She is currently MA Anthropology Programme Director and the Director of Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC) at University College Cork (UCC), National University of Ireland. Her interests lie in the study of indigenous knowledge systems and in particular in shamanic worldviews as indigenous theories of anthropos, agency and eco-cosmology.

Ondračka Lubomír

How to change the world? Tantric manipulation of the gross elements

Various Indian philosophical and religious traditions teach different ontological systems, but the vast majority of them view the external phenomenal world as made of some basic building blocks. These building blocks are the four or five gross elements (*mahābhūtas*). While for ordinary people the material world is a given reality whose physical laws they must obey, Tantrics and advanced yogis have the ability to manipulate and transform this external world in various ways. The general principle behind the control of material things lies in the skill of conquering the elements. In my presentation, I will first introduce the position and role of the elements in the ontological systems used by tantric traditions. Then I will describe the techniques that can be used to control the elements and finally I will show the results that mastering the elements can bring.

Bio: Lubomír Ondračka is a publisher, independent researcher and part-time lecturer at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. His research is focused on the history of yoga, death, and dying in India, and on religions and culture of Bengal.

Ruth Westoby

Body and cosmos in early *haṭha* yoga

If the most pressing issue of our times and our future is the consequences of environmental degradation – not just a health crisis for humanity but an existential one for all species - can a turn to early *haṭha* yoga texts and contexts of bodies and cosmos frame a remedial mode of being human in a future world? ‘Ancient wisdom’ is no sticking plaster for modern malaise and I am cautious of the prescriptive approach. Nevertheless, the articulation of the identity of body and cosmos, of body and cosmos as consisting of the same materiality in early *haṭha* sources, at once insists on the imbrication of body as cosmos yet also gestures to yogic sovereignty over cosmos.

This presentation analyses the materiality of body and yogic body in relation to the elemental world in early *haṭha* yoga. What is the nature of the identity of body and cosmos? How do the yoga materials articulate mastery of the universe and prescribe the techniques to achieve it? Is this purely mastery over or is there also an ethic of symbiosis? Drawing on articulations of body and cosmos in the *Amṛtasiddhi* and *Gorakṣasāṭaka*, and the materiality (*jadā*) of the body in the *Yogabīja* and *Śivasambhita*, I find the body and cosmos to be already near identical without the intervention of ritual inscription of body as cosmos. The mastery of body and cosmos could be propogandist but does not appear to be in extractive mode familiar from contemporary scenarios. However, the sources do centre the individual *vis à vis* their body, other beings, and the triple world.

Bio: Ruth Westoby is a final year doctoral candidate at SOAS University of London and she teaches for SOAS YogaStudies Online. Ruth’s thesis is a historical textual study of the yoga body in Sanskrit sources on early *haṭha* yoga in which she identifies the functional paradigms of the body that explain how yoga works. As a practitioner Ruth has collaborated on the reconstruction of historical textual sequences of postures, contributing to the development of a new methodology: embodied philology. Ruth’s 2021 article, ‘Raising *rajas* in *haṭha* yoga and beyond’, appears in *Religions of South Asia*. Ruth also chairs a campaign group working for floodplain meadow restoration in England. Her research interests include yoga, the body, gender, textual history and critical theory.

James Mallinson

The Dangers of Yoga

In yoga texts from the 11th century CE onwards the body comes to the fore. It is no longer to be ignored, subdued or mortified, but has become a tool for liberation. The associated practices are said to perfect the body, removing disease and even rendering it immortal. But these practices are dangerous: if performed incorrectly they can harm the practitioner. In this paper I shall examine textual passages which warn of the potential dangers of yoga’s methods. I shall first look at statements from outside the traditions that practised yoga and then turn to yoga texts themselves, providing examples from the early (11th to 14th-century) corpus and then focussing on the 18th-century *Haṭhasamketacandrikā* of Sundaradeva.

Bio: James Mallinson is Reader in Indology and Yoga Studies at SOAS University of London and chair of the SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies, which he set up in 2018. He was the principle investigator of the Hatha Yoga Project, a five-year six-person investigation into the history of haṭhayoga funded by the European Research Council whose outputs will include ten critical editions of important Sanskrit texts on haṭhayoga. Among his many publications is *Roots of Yoga*, an anthology of translations from more than 160 texts on yoga, co-authored with Mark Singleton and published by Penguin Classics. From September 2023 Dr Mallinson will take up the chair of Boden Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford.

Annette Hornbacher

The invention of Balinese ‘tantra’: Esoteric text practices between salvation and manipulation

In Bali, ‘tantra’ is a recently adopted label and an emerging discourse amongst intellectuals and practitioners. Rather than being an ancient tradition, the term indicates a new interest in an old corpus of esoteric manuscripts that was secret and marginalized during Suharto’s dictatorship, which was the period when Balinese rituals were defined as « Hinduism » based on the Veda. Local esoteric manuscripts dealing with witchcraft on the one hand, and with individual soteriological yoga techniques on the other, were politically ignored and personally feared because manuscripts and in fact the letters in which they are written are regarded as powerful agents. Based on my long-term research with older Balinese practitioners of these esoteric texts and its mystical aksara, I will describe the relation between script, public ritual, and individual

techniques of soteriology and witchcraft, comparing it with the current re-definition of this marginalized and almost forgotten text tradition in terms of Balinese 'tantra'.

Bio: Annette Hornbacher is a Professor of Anthropology at the Heidelberg University. Her research area is South-East Asia and in particular Bali. Her main research topics are ritual, performance and trance-possession, religious dynamics, anthropology of ethics, and environmental Anthropology. She is currently member of an interdisciplinary research project on the SFB 933, "*Material Text Cultures*."

William Sax

Looking Forward and Looking Back: Tantra and Veda

In the Western Himalayas of North India, *tantrik* texts and rituals are clearly distinguished from their *vaidik* counterparts. The distinction goes all the way back to the marriage of Shiva and Sati in Kankhal, near Haridwar, which is the founding myth of local tantra. The distinction between Veda and Tantra encapsulates a range of further distinctions: between male and female, high and low, spiritual and worldly, microcosm and macrocosm, tradition and change. It also encodes the difference between, on the one hand, conservative rituals meant to ensure continuity, and on the other hand dynamic, sometimes dangerous rituals to deal with change and transformation. All of this has significant implications for us, living as we do in an age of crisis.

Bio: Prof. William S. Sax, PhD obtained degrees from the University of Washington in Seattle and Banaras Hindu University before earning his M.A. (1982) and PhD (1987) in Anthropology at the University of Chicago. He taught for two years at Harvard University and eleven years in Christchurch, New Zealand before becoming head of the Department of Anthropology in 2000.

Richard David Williams

Muslim Mantras, Commercial Tantra, and Self-Help Books, c.1870-1930

In the mid-1870s, Panah Ali published his handbook on divination and magic, *Indrajāl*. This convenient guide provided its readers with accessible and practical information on different esoteric practices, including notes on astrology and the zodiac, recipes for charms, mantras, and yantra diagrams. This handbook located non-sectarian mantras within a larger framework of useful, quotidian magical practices. The spell book gestures to a significant book industry that offered guidance on mantra, yogic practices, and ritual techniques to non-specialist readers. Taken together, these works indicate how mantra was discussed and practiced from a range of vantage points, including domestic magic, healing, colonial-era science, and treatments of the arts. These popular books challenge certain presentist assumptions about tantra and mantra: in particular, I consider the place of Muslim editors and practitioners in this book market and ask how we might include them in our larger sense of the history of tantra?

Bio: Richard David Williams is Senior Lecturer in Music and South Asian Studies at SOAS. A cultural historian of music and sound, his work explores aesthetics and the performing arts in northern India across the early modern and colonial periods. His first book, *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal* came out in 2023.

Stefano Beggiora

On the Trail of the Tigers: Approaches to Multispecies Ethnography in India

The present study aims to analyze the theme of human-non human/animal coexistence from the lens of multispecies ethnography. The case study concerns the Kondh villages, an indigenous ethnic group of Odisha (India) who live in close proximity to forest areas very rich in wildlife and local fauna. In particular, a set of myths, folk tales and popular beliefs are here a metaphor of the dynamics of coexistence with the big cats. On the other hand, the stories of fear, the presence of evil spirits and weretigers emphasize the serious concerns of local communities about an increasingly exploited territory, and problems such as deforestation and climate change, which also strongly affect animal life and welfare.

Bio: Stefano Beggiora is Associate Professor of Indian History, Hindi Literature and Ethnography of Shamanism at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice (Italy). Specialized in the study of Asian shamanism, he has carried out more than twenty years of research among indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities mainly of the Indian subcontinent. He has published several books and scientific articles on the history and religions of the native (adivasi) communities of India, but also on the human rights of minorities, contemporary politics, economics and international relations in Asia. He is currently director of the

STRADE series dedicated to anthropological and religious studies edited by Franco Angeli in Milan and of the international scientific review *Lagoonscapes*, *The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*.

Fabio Armand

Into the wildlands. Shamanic initiations on the border of wilderness among Eastern Gurung

Among the Eastern Gurung of Laprak (Gorkha district, Nepal), the *ḍhum* is a particular type of ritual practitioner, an intermediary between humans and spirits. By travelling through the realm of wilderness, *ḍhums* draw to the knowledge and become directly related to a special kind of beings inhabiting the wildlands. Embedded in a shamanic tradition that runs throughout the Himalayan range, I will look at the figure of the *Ne ḍhum*, the forest shaman: as a ritual initiator to the techniques of shamanism, it kidnaps young candidates to bring them into the wildlands and transmits them a wide variety of shamanic techniques and tools (*mantras*, shamanic drum, ritual objects, etc.). I will show that wildlands, as fluid boundaries on which relationships between human and non-human can be woven, become the place of enshrinement of shamanic knowledge, as well as a space for reciprocity between these two realms.

Bio: Fabio Armand is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics at the Catholic University of Lyon (Sciences and Humanities Confluences Research Center, EA1598). He conducts ethnographic and ethnolinguistic fieldwork in the Nepalese Himalayas, especially among Hindu high castes Bahun-Chhetri and Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups, Newar and, more recently, Eastern Gurung. He contributed to the development of a neurocognitive anthropological perspective aiming at studying the neural basis of shamanism(s).

Monika Hirmer

Have we ever been human? Of Śrīvidyā, Sentient Environments and Anthropocentric Aberrations

Since language, or the capacity to defer meaning to signifiers, is largely understood as that, which separates humans from other animals and the environment, language is also that, which hampers the unmediated apperception of the environment and non-human perspectives. While in western contexts linguistic abstraction dominates, in South Asia, crucially, it is juxtaposed to embodied communication, evident in *mantras*, devotional worship and divine possession. Conducting fieldwork among South Indian Śrīvidyā practitioners largely without mastering their language, while considered poor anthropological practice, brought sensory data and the unmediated nature of idols, rituals and surroundings centre-stage, disclosing the environment's active involvement in practitioners' everyday lives and, moreover, its distinct vantage points. Shifting attention from communication as language to communication as embodied beingness, allows for innumerable non-human experiences integral to Śrīvidyā life to 'speak', and for the world according to Devī, cats and hills, to be appreciated. This talk uncovers the communicative limitations and existential isolation that emphasis on language—and, therefore, humanness—engenders, and challenges anthropology's methodological imperatives. It dislocates the *anthropos*' centrality and evidences the need for a profound revision of the discipline, for it to reflect the Anthropocene's arbitrariness and be meaningfully decolonial.

Bio: Monika Hirmer is a certified Teaching Fellow (FHEA) who has been teaching at SOAS, University of London, in the departments of Religions and Philosophies and Politics and International Studies. Monika's area of research spans Goddess traditions, tantric traditions, rituals, ontology and concepts of personhood, the ontological turn in anthropology and decolonial studies, with a focus on South Asia. She obtained her PhD in Religions and Philosophies from SOAS, preceded by an MPhil in Anthropology of Religion from the University of Hyderabad, India, and an MA in South Asian Area Studies from SOAS. She also holds a BA in Political Sciences from the University of Florence, Italy. In 2020 Monika has co-founded (with Dr Romina Istratii) the open access, multilingual and peer reviewed publishing platform *Decolonial Subversions*, of which she is Editor-in-Chief. From October 2023 she will be a postdoctoral fellow at the centre for advanced studies 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective', Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg.