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# *Shamanism and Eco-cosmology.*

## *A cross-cultural perspective*

Organised & Conceptualised

by

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**Location: Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences,**

**Conference Room, DESKOI Building,**

**Lagoumitzi and Trikoupi Str., Athens**

This workshop focusses eco-cosmology as a worldview prevalent in shamanic cultures worldwide. Contemporary shamanisms are embedded in analogous ecological knowledge systems relating always to indigenous cosmologies and ontologies (Kopenawa/Albert 2013). Local shamanisms are commonly understood as value systems based on the one hand on cultures of orality, on the other hand on the non-dualistic perspective on human and non-human agencies in a mutually shared world and cosmos (Descola 1992, (2005) 2013, Viveiro de Castro 1998).

Within the process of industrial extraction of natural resources diverse indigenous / analogous communities are deprived of their fundamental human rights for secured livelihood and preserved ecosystems. An industrial neo-colonial intrusion into mineral rich territories of indigenous and analogous peoples takes place worldwide. With the ecological degradation, vulnerable worldviews of indigenous/ analogous communities and their rituals are critically threatened.



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These worldviews and local knowledge systems however could be a key for finding local and global solutions for a sustainable and philanthropic global world of cultural and eco-biological diversity and mutuality.

The 2-days workshop discusses from anthropological, environmental and study of religions perspective local eco-cosmological shamanic knowledge systems and worldviews. It aims on the one hand at displaying the threatened local ecological knowledge transmitted by shamans; on the other hand the workshop aims at a valuation and recognition of shamanic eco-cosmological solutions for a sustainable world and cosmos.

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## Abstracts

### *Shamanism and Eco-cosmology: a cross-cultural perspective*

#### **1. The Kondhs and the Jungle: A case Study on indigenous India.**

Stefano Beggiora, University Ca' Foscari, Venice, Italy

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The most recent studies in anthropology have stressed the need to reconsider the issue of otherness and pluralism by drawing inspiration from indigenous ontologies thus reassessing human/non-human relations. On this premise, I propose to develop an analogous paradigm by offering the case study of my ethnographic research on an aboriginal group (adivasi) living in one of the most remote and pristine jungle areas of Odisha (India), the Kuttia Kondhs.

The struggle for survival of the Kondhs hinges on a shamanism that implies notions of 'Indigenous Knowledge of the Forest', land use, natural pharmacopoeia, collection and employment of timber, and other minor forest produce. The shamanic perspective implies a complexity of agencies intertwining relationships through and beyond the human dimension. This urges on necessity of negotiating 'how forests think' with the other inhabitants of the jungle - a crucial question for any forest management in the future that can also be the key to rethinking the concept of sustainability.

On the other hand, now the adivasi groups in the central districts of Odisha realize - and keep proclaiming it through many local protest movements - that the destruction of the forests is leading to the deterioration of living conditions among the communities that inhabit the region. This discussion has had an effect on contemporary public opinion in India. On the one hand, it is grafted onto a general moment of reflection on environmental issues and human rights conditions; on the other hand, it clashes with the more general urge for modernization and national development aims and the herewith related imperatives of exploitation of the soil and subsoil as valuable resources for modern industrial societies.

#### **2. Unblocking the Blockage between Earth and Heaven: Shamanism as Cultural Intimacy in China.**

Naran Bilik, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

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My paper uses the metaphor 'The Blockage Between Earth and Heaven' that appears in the Chinese classical Shang Shu and Guo Yu historio-mythical texts. I argue that a parallel blockage exists in China between shamanic practice 'backstage' and official presentation 'frontstage' (Goffman 1959). I draw on ) as well as Sherry Ortner's analytical framework of key symbols to offer an in-depth analysis of the context in which shamanic studies in China are situated today.



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On the one hand, the Chinese authorities do not openly authorize the establishment of any shamanic society; on the other hand, shamanic cultures can be studied as folk customs. Shamanic performances are quite popular in rural areas and enjoy popularity. Though researchers are still arguing whether shamanism is a widespread phenomenon in China, there is a family resemblance in folk practice in many parts of the country. Both folks and officials actually engage in such practice backstage and treat it as cultural intimacy that is not open for outsiders. There are grey areas, too. Recently the central government calls for restoration and development of traditional cultures in order to revive cultural values. To rebuild a belief system that can bind all peoples together is a must. However, unblocking the blockage between earth and heaven remains a myth. Cultural intimacy presides.

### **3. The Spirits of Extractivism: Non-human Meddling, Shamanic Diplomacy and Cosmo-political Strategy among the Urarina (Peruvian Amazon).**

Emanuele Fabiano, The School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, LAS), Paris, France  
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In the last decades, the incorporation of the Amazonian territories into the productive sector has led to an intense process of colonization and to the presence of economic, mining, extractive and agro-industrial fronts, constant growth from capital investment, exploitation of natural resources, environmental impact, and coercive forms of inclusion. In the Peruvian Amazon, the result has been an increasingly intense and complex interaction between the contemporary Amazonian indigenous societies and the many non-indigenous representatives—including the State and international markets. This has had important impacts on the contemporary indigenous definition of territory, property, resources and their uses, and even on ritual life and social reproduction processes.

In this context, the case of the Urarina of Chambira basin (Peruvian Amazon) represents a paradigmatic example of how the shamanic discourse interprets and manages the changes that involve community life—especially when it is significantly modified by intensification of resources exploitation, such as wood and oil. I will analyze how the level of conflict between the Urarina and non-indigenous societies characterizes their relations with specific categories of non-human people.

Usually associated with contagious diseases, evil spirits, metamorphic beings, and predators—whose diffusion is due to the neo-colonial politics or to the greater circulation of money and industrial goods—the non-human people are often seen as allies of ‘whites’, the State, or representatives of extractive enterprises. For this reason, it is believed that these entities move to the interior of the Urarina territory using the oil pipelines, have factories, and traffic in human slaves to keep their production lines active in underground plants—activities that shaman discourse associated with events of great ecological impact, such as oil spills or climate change.

This implies a shamanic intervention for the re-composition of a specific ‘communicative field’ and the definition of a new diplomacy, a precise ‘cosmo-political’ strategy, whereby is possible to redefine alliances between humans and non-humans, to strengthen relations, to recognize areas of intervention and collaboration.



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#### 4. The Earth and the Tree in Alekh-Shamanism in tribal Odisha (India).

Lidia Guzy, University College Cork (National University of Ireland), Cork, Ireland

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This paper deals with Alekh shamanism; a new tribal religion, Mahima Dharma, in the Koraput region of Odisha. This new religion in the remote hinterlands of Odisha combines traditional local shamanic practices, concepts of a new ascetic ethic, and the new belief in the abstract and indescribable god Alekh (“the unwritten and illiterate”) from coastal (Hindu) Odisha. In Koraput, the term ‘Alekh’ has taken on a new variant meaning—namely the followers of the ascetic religion themselves bear the name of the God from the coastal Hindu regions. Alekhs are thus, in their emic self-descriptions; the representatives, mediators, and the bearers of the divine!

I will focus on the ritual symbolism and ritual practice around the Earth and the Tree within the local cosmo-ecology of Alekh shamanism in tribal Odisha.

#### 5. Ecological Living in Peril: The Case of Kalasha Society in Hindu Kush.

Taj Khan Kalash, independent researcher (Pakistan/Greece)

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The indigenous Kalasha People of Hindu Kush mountains are the last followers of an ancient shamanic belief system where nature plays a major role. The likes of animist belief systems were once practiced across Hindu Kush by several ethnic groups before the advent of Islam in the region. The Kalasha, numbering 4000 today, live in three distinct valleys of Chitral bordering Afghanistan in Northern Pakistan.

My talk aims to discuss the aspects of ecological living and conversation embedded in the Kalasha’s moral and ritual system. The Kalasha world view divides the landscape into zones of varying purity. In the bottom of each valley, along the banks of the river, special buildings called bashali are provided for activities such as giving birth or menstruation. The goat stables and the pastures are considered Onjesta (pure), and are home of the super natural beings (suchi). Each year a roi (a ritual charge) is given to initiated men to conduct offerings at various altars. A special constabulary of young men (Den Wals) charged with monitoring over grazing of forests, crops, and unwarranted activity in forests. Like many disempowered indigenous groups, Kalasha are threatened with the extinction of their ecological life style—achieved through observing traditional rules for centuries. My talk will also present the issue of large scale logging by the State and contractors. Deforestation has rendered the Kalasha especially vulnerable to flash flooding and destruction of indigenous culture.



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## 6. The Making of Shaman among the Three Northern Minorities in China and the Hero's Theme.

Lu Fangfang, Center for National Minorities Studies at Fudan University, Shanghai, China

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After briefly introducing the current living conditions of the three small Altaic language speaking minorities in North China, the Daur, the Evenk, and the Oroqen—who are well known for their shamanic practices both in the past and at present—I compare their shaman-making processes with an eye to the Hero's theme developed by Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I argue that there is a natural connection between Campbell's processual model of 'Departure/Initiation/Ultimate boon', and that of 'Transformation into a shaman/Knowledge acquisition/Problem solving' among the three small minorities in North China. While the core of Campbell's theory centers on the spiritual journey of the hero's self-discovery and receiving supernatural aid, it parallels with the psychedelic path that a shaman must go through at a rite held for the occasion. Psychic unity of the human kind is a common tie that binds the scholarship of the West and the East. Despite diversified cultural traditions and local features, there is a meta-connection that overrides all these traits.

I believe that such comparison is beneficial to the healthy development of shamanic studies in China and can possibly shed a new light on how to break through the deadlock in the theoretic study of shamanism in China. No doubt, all this has to rely on ethnographic 'thick description' and intense theoretic discussion.

## 7. Amarkantak: The eco cosmology and sacred complex.

Ranju Hasini Sahoo, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Madhya Pradesh, India

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Having diverse communities and a botanical diversity of flora and fauna, Amarkantak National Biosphere of India is of great conservation value. Being the origin place of the mythologically sacred river Narmada, as well as the place of the sacred act of its circumambulation by pilgrims, diverse religious philosophies have thrived in Amarkantak since ancient times placing Amarkantak into the sacred geography of India. Circumambulation has a deep meaning in creation of the religious space, connecting the pilgrim to the cosmos. Amarkantak, mythologically was the abode of many ancient sages like Kapila and Bhrigu who have a prominent place in the field of Hindu cosmology and astrology. The Greek geographer Ptolemy also mentioned it.

The Baiga, Gond, Oram, Agharia, and Panika are the major tribal communities of this region. The paper explores linkages between nature and culture; analyses particular cultural practices and religious beliefs of the above mentioned tribal communities in general; and how the Baiga in particular have a great influence for the conservation and management of natural resources. Data are collected through focused group discussions, interviews, and case study methods; and the key informants of the study are religious officials and village elders—being the living archives of traditional knowledge and belief systems. The paper examines how the eco-cosmologies of the tribes are having a direct link to regulations of natural resources that testifies to the symbiotic relationship between man and nature.



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The scope of the paper also expands how through the continuity of civilizations, Amarkantak has developed into one of the sacred heritage complexes of India.

### **8. “The War Has Just Begun.” Nature’s Fury against Neocolonial ‘Spirit/s’: Shamanic Perceptions of Natural Disasters in Comparative Perspective.**

Diana Riboli, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece

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This paper aims to discuss shamanic perceptions of natural disasters. In the frame of the many challenges indigenous knowledge has to face on a local and global level, the increase of devastating earthquakes and tsunamis is creating much distress and preoccupation in indigenous ontologies, well-being, and world-views.

Natural disasters are interpreted as furious revenge and an alarming warning of Nature, Mother Earth, and other-than-human beings who react to “postcolonial imbalance” (Langford, 2002) caused by neo-liberalistic politics, neocolonial exploitation as well as various forms of national and transnational, structural and cultural violence.

The discussion will present two case studies related to indigenous perceptions of earthquakes and tsunamis among the Chepang of Nepal and the Batek of Peninsular Malaysia.

A variety of local and global agents as well as cosmic spheres and historical consciousness related to past, present, and future events all intertwine in shamans’ narratives and practices. I perceive the aforementioned situation as a kind of ‘cosmic drama’ whose current act can be described as a state of warfare. The conclusion of this praxis currently appears to be uncertain.

“Things went too far...The war has just begun” as a Nepali shaman declared about one year after the earthquake which killed thousands of people in 2015. Indigenous eschatologies are assuming more apocalyptic dimensions, although shamans keep fighting to reestablish the cosmic balance both in their role of therapists and political leaders.

### **9. Rearranging Cosmic Relations: Cosmopolitics in the Anthropocene.**

Ivan Tacey, University of Helsinki, Finland & College of Social Sciences & International Studies, University of Exeter, UK

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In this paper, I discuss how Bateks (an indigenous group from Peninsular Malaysia) have reconfigured their eco-cosmologies, relations with other-than-human beings, and discourses about their shamanistic-animistic practices as extractive industries have rapidly and radically transformed their formerly-forested environments. Recent changes have led to an intensification of interactions between Bateks and non-indigenous peoples—State representatives, tourists, palm-oil workers, poachers, and so on. Territorial loss, landscape degradation, and neo-colonial state policy has meant many Bateks have been





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relocated to the edges of the forests in resettlement villages where they are pushed to assimilate to the numerically and politically dominant Malay sector of society.

The forest periphery is a site of complex interconnection with a variety of actors and agencies of the forest and the local and larger national and globalised human environment. From this peripheral location Batek shamans have reassembled relations with other-than-human beings and built new discourses about environmental changes. In the past, powerful non-human persons sent destructive storms and floods to punish Bateks for any local transgression of taboos. In the contemporary context, these beings are said to be punishing non-Bateks in Malaysia for destroying sacred sites and ancient forests—homes of non-human persons—and in distant countries for widespread environmental destruction, violence and other transgressions of prohibitions.

Many Bateks now describe the future in apocalyptic terms, mirroring environmentalists' discourses about the Anthropocene. However, some shamans have become cosmopolitical diplomats who attempt to circumvent impending disaster by restructuring cosmic relations and rebuilding the damaged structure of the invisible world. Shamans' negotiations and labours in the invisible world find their equivalent in the visible world as alliances are built with NGOs and other national and international actors, and Bateks have become increasingly politicized in their attempts to prevent the destruction of their environment as they situate themselves as agents in a complex globalized environment.

## 10. Sacred and Alive: human, non-human and landscape in the (Buddhist) Himalayas.

Davide Torri, Heidelberg University, (Germany)

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This paper aims to highlight a recurring set of topics, themes, and beliefs widely shared by several Himalayan cultures. In particular, the notions related to the web of relations entangling human and other-than-human communities, which constitute the epistemological framework to understand, explore, and discuss ideas, ideologies, and worldviews about the environment. In the Himalayas, in fact, the cosmos is thought to be parcelled among several entities interacting with each other on a regular basis, each of them in charge of a specific sphere of influence. Villagers tend to interpret and explain daily occurrences—especially bad luck, misfortune, illness and disgrace—very often as the result of the interaction between the individual and one of the many entities with whom she shares the landscape. Landscape itself, moreover, could be sometimes represented as a living field of forces or a distinct, powerful entity.





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## 11. Oil extraction and Siberian indigenous peoples: reconstructing ontologies.

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The Western Siberian basin has been for a little less than half a century one of the main oil and gas extraction areas of the Soviet Union and later Russian Federation. It is of crucial material importance for the Russian State. But, this same region is inhabited by indigenous peoples, which is uncomfortable for both parts; the local inhabitants' life is disrupted, and they are a bothering obstacle to unrestrained extraction. I would not characterise the Western Siberian indigenous peoples' cultures as shamanistic, because after the Soviet repressions against shamans, this dimension of the local practice has faded; while the ontological mechanisms that underpin it are still there, on an animistic basis. Some religious specialists, who may be called shamans, are still around—though in a rather non-compelling way. There are fewer and fewer religious specialists, and their influence, depending on the regions, is quite limited. Local ontologies are rooted deep in space; all damage to the space has consequences on both the ways the indigenous peoples may organise their lives and on their ontology:

The vital space for the indigenous inhabitants of the taiga has been dramatically reduced. This has led to frequent relocations and has obliged many of them to abandon reindeer herding and it has limited hunting and fishing. It has also deprived reindeer herders of their traditional sacred places, which may have induced psychological traumas.

It has led to sharing space and thus to new and often disrupting contacts, with non-respectful populations that desecrated sacred places and cemeteries. This has led to the feeling that the Gods, who are very much rooted in space, are silent and have disappeared, as says Yuri Vella in a poem.

Still religious sacrificial practice is very much maintained, at the family level at least. Sacred places are attended and protected, the indigenous peoples' everyday life still responds to traditional rules of communication between the worlds.

What are the future prospects for the indigenous peoples? Oil is going to finish and this region, at some point in the future, will probably be abandoned. The indigenous peoples, who have nowhere to go, will be compelled to draw on their skills in surviving, which have been well honed in their culture, but have been threatened in the last decades. Still, they are probably the way into the future. Then, we may suppose that the gods and the spirits, who have been compelled to partial concealment, will regain their full place and take over their destroyed space, on the bases of ontologies that have not lost their grip on the local population.