

EUROSEAS 2022

Title:

Ethnographies of the Numinous: Exploring the Social Life of Phi in Thailand and Beyond

Conveners:

Benjamin Baumann (Assistant Professor, Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University)

Visisya Pinthongvijayakul (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Chandrakasem Rajabhat University Bangkok / Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University)

Format:

Double session (6 presenters plus 2 discussants)

Abstract:

'Phi' are nonhuman beings that are known not only in all Tai languages, but also by speakers of other regional languages that have interacted with Tai-speakers over prolonged periods of time. Scholarly texts written in English tend to translate the word *phi* as 'spirit' or 'ghost'. This panel invites contributions that showcase the multiple ways in which *phi* manifest in everyday life. Our goal is to challenge the commonly encountered translations that associate *phi* first and foremost with unwanted presences of the ontologically other, whereby their ostensible invisibility functions as a marker of their ontological otherness. Inspired by the premises of 'new animism' and 'the ontological turn', we seek to question the associated tendency to rationalize *phi* by treating them as symbols or symptoms that stand for something else. In order to decolonize Southeast Asian studies, we argue that we need to deconstruct the myth that scholars are able to elucidate this something by relying on their objective scientific gaze.

We encourage papers that treat *phi* nonrepresentationally as social beings, explore their social lives, their agency and how they affectively engage with humans and nonhumans as members of social collectives. Papers may address one or more of the following questions: Are ethnographies of *phi* possible? If yes, how would they look like? What are the epistemological and methodological challenges of approaching *phi* ethnographically? How can we translate the word *phi*, without being epistemologically violent? What are the limitations of 'new animism' and 'the ontological turn' when we study *phi*? Is it possible to utilize the premises of the 'spectral turn', if we truly seek to decolonize area studies?

Confirmed participants:

Benjamin Baumann (Assistant Professor, Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University)

Kazuo Fukuura (Assistant Professor, Toin University of Yokohama)

Peter A. Jackson (Emeritus Professor, School of Culture History and Language, Australian National University)

Michael Kleinod (Assistant Professor, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Bonn University)

Guido Sprenger (Professor, Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University)

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Stéphane Rennesson (Assistant Professor, CNRS, Paris)

Erick White (Independent Researcher)

Courtney Work (Associate Professor, National Chengchi University, Taiwan)