**EuroSEAS 2023**

*Laboratory Proposal*

**Title:**

*Are there ‘Witches’ in Southeast Asia?*

**Conveners:**

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**Theme**

Although ‘witchcraft’ is an elusive term, it played an important role as an analytic concept in the disciplinary history of modern anthropology. Seminal publications that are now seen as ‘classics’ of the discipline address magic and witchcraft more specifically. Most of these ‘classics’ deal with African societies. This contributed essentially to the close association that exists between the region ‘Africa’ and the field ‘witchcraft’ in anthropological discourses. While there were always contributions from Southeast Asia that address practices loosely classifiable under the label ‘witchcraft’, there are only a few volumes that look at these phenomena from a comparative Southeast Asian perspective (Watson and Ellen 1993). The contemporary scholarship explicitly addressing witchcraft in the region – with a few remarkable exceptions (Bubandt 2014, Siegel 2006) – is largely dormant. Simultaneously, scholars document the continuing and growing relevance of witchcraft-related practices in the postmodern and postcolonial states of Southeast Asia (Jackson 2022).

Working closely together for the past two years at Heidelberg University’s Institute of Anthropology, the organizers recognized the strong commonalities that exist between witchcraft-related ideas and practices in Bali and Northeastern Thailand. They simultaneously observe that these similarities are rarely addressed in anthropological texts, which tend to deal with witchcraft and related practices in insular or mainland societies more or less exclusively (Jackson and Baumann 2022). This is where the organizers see the potentials of an area studies approach to witchcraft in Southeast Asia. Area studies not only offer the advantage of bringing regional experts from various disciplinary backgrounds to the conversation, but the area concept as such offers a comparative perspective that crosses the insular/mainland divide that anthropological approaches often lack due to their focus on specific localities. While the organizers explicitly acknowledge the need to pay attention to this localization of knowledge in order to understand witchcraft-related phenomena, they nevertheless think that a comparative perspective and an exchange between regional expertise from insular and mainland Southeast Asia will open up new vantage points to understand localized practices. We see this laboratory as a first step in bringing together regional experts who have worked on witchcraft-related practices in the past to discuss potential fields for cooperation in the future that bridges the insular/mainland divide. The anthropology of witchcraft in Southeast Asia may greatly benefit from a transdisciplinary area studies dialogue in laboratory form to explore ways of how to move collaborative research in this fascinating field into a more productive future. The central question that will guide this laboratory is the question whether there are ‘witches’ in Southeast Asia or whether the application of the terms ‘witch’ and witchcraft in Southeast Asian contexts are category mistakes in Ryle’s sense.

**Format**

This laboratory will establish a dialogue between scholars of religion, politics, anthropology, history, sociology and art who research contrasting domains, fields and dynamics of social power and religiosity in contemporary Southeast Asia. By thinking comparatively both within local settings and across the entire region, the laboratory seeks to develop a more robust, critical and nuanced conceptual and analytic vocabulary through which to advance the comparative study of witchcraft and related social phenomena in Southeast Asia.

Our format does not require participants to write full-fledged papers in advance but rather short position papers of 800 words, summarizing their main responses to the laboratory’s theme relating to their own empirical work. These position papers will be distributed in advance and collectively discussed at the beginning of the laboratory, serving as a shared point of reference for the subsequent open-ended conversation.

**Application**

In this semi-open laboratory we invite contributions by scholars who have conducted empirical research on magic and witchcraft-related topics or reflected theoretically on these issues. Please send us a short motivational note in which you detail what you would like to address during the laboratory and what you expect from the format.

**Bibliography**

Bubandt, Nils. 2014. *The Empty Seashell. Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

Jackson, Peter A. 2022. *Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment*. Singapore: ISEAS.

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Siegel, James. 2006. *Naming the Witch*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Watson, C.W., and Roy Ellen, eds. 1993. *Understanding Witchcraft and Sorcery in Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.