Chair: Boris Koenig, Département de sociologie, Université du Québec à Montréal & Department of Anthropology, Leuven University

Panel Title: Thinking Again About the Occult: New Approaches to the Study of Religion in Africa

Panel Abstract:
In the wake of inaugural works on the "modernity of witchcraft" and "occult economies", studies on the role and place of the occult in African societies have multiplied in recent decades. Contrary to classical ethnographic studies, which suggest that manifestations of occult forces are associated with fixed, rural and traditional representations and practices, recent studies have drawn attention to the plasticity of practices and discourses on the occult and on their ability to renew and adapt to the transformations of postcolonial African societies. The ubiquity of invisible forces seems to be exposed in all places and in all situations, such as in the forms of enterprise and accumulation, political life, the field of non-biomedical healing and health, public culture, the use of communication technologies or intimate romantic and family relationships. The influence of occult forces also crosses the world of animist, Christian and Muslim religious traditions present on the continent. A plurality of conceptual and methodological perspectives are thus set to apprehend practices and discourses on the occult, as well as the multiple interrelations between different domains of social life and the spiritual worlds, such as: witchcraft, magic, fetishism, maraboutage, esoteric sciences, religious healing or demonology. In dialogue with the influential debates that have marked this field of research, this panel revisits the ways of understanding contemporary dynamics of the occult and proposes new approaches to study the centrality of these phenomena in African postcolonial societies.

Paper 1:
Author: Pier-Olivier Tremblay, Département de sociologie, Université du Québec à Montréal
Title: Islam and the Esoteric Sciences: Ethos, Discourse and Legitimacy Among "marabouts"
Abstract:
A commonly shared idea in the scientific literature on the Islamic esoteric sciences in West Africa is that the status of these sciences is often ambiguous and contested. In line with this, some Muslim reformist movements that appeared in West Africa during the last decades have described these sciences and their practitioners as un-Islamic, thus contributing to the equivocality of the esoteric sciences in Muslim contexts. They have encouraged Muslims to abandon these practices, thereby putting more pressure on the social and religious legitimacy of the marabouts. In this context, one can wonder how the marabouts, whose historical relationship with the esoteric sciences is well known in West Africa, build their legitimacy as privileged mediators of the relationship between individuals and the esoteric sciences in Islamic West Africa. This communication will focus on the transmission, learning and use of the esoteric sciences among marabouts in the city of Bouaké (Ivory Coast), as means to understand how the marabouts build their legitimacy. From excerpts of interviews conducted with marabouts in Bouaké between June and September 2018, it will demonstrate how the many practices one does as a marabout, such as submitting to a master, knowing what knowledge to use and when, and deciding whom
to transmit knowledge to, relates to a certain way of being in the world. Focusing on this ethos, we argue, is a way to understand what the marabouts deem a legitimate form of self in contemporary Bouaké.

Paper 2:
Author: Diahara Traoré, Département de sociologie, UQAM
Title: Liminality and spirituality in African women immigrants' help-seeking in mental health
Summary:
This paper examines health-seeking trajectories of African Muslim women immigrants in Quebec, through their conceptions and connections to beliefs and practices that resist Western secular discourses on mental health. This analysis of the women’s therapeutic processes and coping strategies provide valuable contributions to the dearth of research on African women immigrants and the interconnection between mental health, religion, and gender. It also contributes to existing research on gender, migration, and transnationalism by taking an innovative look at the ways in which religion and spirituality participate in meaning-making. The concept of liminalité by A. van Gennep and V. Turner as well as H. Bhabha’s concept of unhomeliness provide relevant conceptual grounds for examining the therapeutic trajectories and the constructions of healing in relation to immigrant identity. The paper argues that help-seeking in mental health is a gender-specific and transnational therapeutic circuit outside of established Western medical institutions. Symbolic and material borders emerge as sites of agency, empowerment, and gender-specific solidarity.

Paper 3:
Author: Boris Koenig, Université du Québec à Montréal & Catholic University of Leuven
Title: Ethnographic notes on urban youth initiatory journeys into animist esoteric practices in Côte d’Ivoire
Abstract:
Although less studied in anthropological research on urban youth mobilities in West Africa, animists healers situated outside the cities constitute prominent poles of attraction that propel young residents to travel in the sub-region. Drawing on twenty-three months of ethnographic fieldwork during which I accompanied young Abidjan residents on their journeys to animist healing places based in villages surrounding secondary cities of Côte d’Ivoire, this paper argues that urban youth lifeworlds are often constructed betwixt and between the dynamics of urban daily life and urban-rural forms of transformative connections. Sprawling transformative connections established in animist healing places provide urban youth with competing and often contradictory ways of interpreting the dynamics of occult forces that influence their lives as well as approaches to coping with the material and spiritual insecurities of urban life. Although youth initiation into esoteric knowledge and practices continues to be prominent in rural parts of the country, most urban youngsters born in the city of Abidjan are not integrated into initiatory cults of any sorts. However, for many of them, being initiated into animist religious traditions, revisiting knowledge on the occult and accessing occult medicines appears to be a matter of life and survival in the city. While numerous young residents of Abidjan take the initiative to get to know and be initiated into occult knowledge, their spiritual journeys in search of reliable animist healers are not only experimental, tentative, and sometimes hazardous but
also limited by the gerontocratic modes of accessing animist esoteric knowledge and medicines.

**Paper 4:**

**Author:** Marie Nathalie LeBlanc, Professeure titulaire, Département de sociologie &

**Title:** Conversation between the Occult and Islam

**Summary:**

The greater part of the anthropological literature on occult dynamics in African societies has been produced in the context of animist and Christian milieus. Studies on Islamic beliefs and practices regarding the occult, frequently referred to as ‘esoteric sciences’, remain very limited and have occupied an entirely distinct field of research. In this paper, I propose to bring into dialogue these two distinct fields of research. To do so, I suggest exploring three threads of reflexion. First, the contemporary urban socio-historical context experienced by devotees of different religious denominations and spiritual believes is a shared space where it is possible to draw parallels between various forms of occult practices. In the second place, rather than focusing on the extraordinary aspect of occult believes and esoteric science, their matter-of-fact dimension should be emphasized. Finally, I propose to centre the scientific gaze on the materiality of occult practices and beliefs by opposition to its function. While my paper examine, in a conceptual manner, the possibility of a conversation between the literature on the occult in contemporary African societies and the one on Islam in Africa, I will bear out my reflexion by empirical examples drawn from my own ethnographic research in West Africa.