

Spirit matters: Exploring histories of spirits and things

Authors' workshop, University of Basel

18-19 June 2026

Centre for African Studies, Rheinsprung 21, room 00.002

This workshop explores the spiritual as a historical dimension. Modern historiography has rethought historical agency on multiple levels, foregrounding how subaltern actors as well as non-human forces have shaped historical trajectories. Yet spiritual agency has proven more difficult to incorporate. With several notable exceptions, much political, social, and environmental history operates with a broadly secular framework: the spiritual is occasionally mentioned, sometimes dismissed, often rationalized—but rarely taken seriously on its own terms.

This absence results from a combination of source-related challenges, scholarly blind spots, and a division of academic labour that assigns questions of transcendence primarily to religious studies. In some instances, however, it likely also reflects a deliberate choice. “Magic”, “ghosts”, and “spirits” have long been central to Western knowledge production about the global south as well as about various “others” within Europe— rural populations, lower classes, women, and ethnic minorities. Given the role of the occult, the spiritual, and ritual in constructing notions of backwardness and superstition in early anthropological, ethnographic and historical scholarship, many contemporary scholars have opted to quarantine the metaphysical rather than confront it directly.

Recently, however, this “de-spiriting” of historiography has itself been criticized as a colonial academic practice, with several scholars arguing that the binary between the secular and “religion” constitutes a European imposition (Yountae, *Coloniality of the Secular*, 2024). How, then, can historians open themselves to broader notions of agency by taking spiritual agency seriously? What counts as evidence in such inquiries? And how can we engage spiritual realities without slipping into exoticization or epistemological relativism?

The workshop addresses these questions by focussing on things – plants, earth, stones, rivers, artifacts, blood, hair, among many others – as sites through which spirits manifest, operate, and communicate with the living. In doing so, it critically interrogates modern distinctions between the “supernatural” and the “physical”, treating them as historically contingent categories specific to particular geographies (largely Europe and the “new Europes”) and social groups (notably bourgeois, science-oriented milieus).

The workshop will take place over two half-days and is conceived as an authors' meeting. Invited participants will discuss pre-circulated papers with the aim of publishing a special issue in a leading journal (such as the *Journal of Global History*, *History and Anthropology*, *Journal of African History*, *Journal of Global History*, *Material Religion*, depending on the final contributions). The

organisers also seek to collaborate with the Museum of Cultures in Basel, drawing on the expertise of its curators as well as its exhibitions and vast object repositories.

External participants are welcome and kindly asked to register: julia.tischler@unibas.ch

Contributors:

- **Diana Jeater**, University of Liverpool, “A European Obsession with Vengeance? White ethnography and African spirits in early 20th century Zimbabwe”
- **Mellisa Kaliofasi**, University of Basel, “‘The dead are not dead’: Spirits mobilization and the distribution of belongings amongst Shona speaking women in Colonial Zimbabwe”
- **Breeanna Elliot**, Yale University, “A Bureaucracy for Spirits, or a Spirited Bureaucracy: Managing the Precarious Belonging of Exogenous Malagasy Spirits”
- **Eduarda Lira de Araujo**, Harvard University, “Sacred Ecologies: Black Healers, Bitter Melons, and Snakes Who Sabotaged Slavery and Forged Freedom in Brazil”
- **Julia Tischler**, University of Basel, “Children, spirits and things in colonial Ghana”
- **Alessandra Manzini**, CY Cergy University, “Cosmoecology, power dynamics, and spirits agency. Entangling visible and invisible realms in African and Asian spiritual landscapes”
- **Meredith McKittrick**, Georgetown University, “Water’s Invisible Agents: Incorporating the spiritual into Namibia’s environmental history”

Programme

Thursday, 18 June 2026

14:15 Welcome and Introduction

14:30 Panel 1: *Diana Jater, Mellisa Kaliofasi*

Presentation (10 min) and discussion (35 min) of pre-circulated papers

16:00 *Coffee break*

16:15 Panel 2: *Alessandra Manzini, Eduarda Lira de Araujo*

Presentation and discussion of pre-circulated papers

18:15 Dinner

Friday, 19 June 2026

8:45 Panel 3: *Breeanna Elliot, Julia Tischler*

Presentation and discussion of pre-circulated papers

10:15 *Coffee break*

10:30 Panel 4: *Meredith McKittrick*

Presentation and discussion of pre-circulated

11:15 Conclusion and plans for publication

12:00 Light lunch and visit to Museum of Cultures with Ursula Regehr

c. 15:00 end