

10<sup>th</sup> Leiden Symposium on New Religiosity

# The Tell-Tale Art

**Divination and Oracular Practice from All Angles**



**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
The Netherlands



**LUCSoR**  
Leiden University  
Centre for the  
Study of Religion

**11 April 2022, 15.00 - 22.00**

◆  
**Lipsius building, lecture hall 005,  
Cleveringaplaats 1, 2311 BD, Leiden**

◆  
**Free admission, but please register by mail:**

**[l.a.van.gulik@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:l.a.van.gulik@hum.leidenuniv.nl)**

In this symposium, we are exploring the varieties of divinatory practice. These techniques are a way to envision, predict and understand the individual's life from the perspective of the sacred world. Whether cast as mere funfair fortune-telling or as the most earnest augury, if religion refers to the bonding between humans and Gods, divination, like prayer, ought to have been ever at its heart. Still, especially in the here and now, the urge for direct experiences and personal understandings of the world became dominant. Consequently, divination now is a staple in the repertoire of spiritual expressions of individual seekers and New Religious Movements. Ultimately aiming to understand the functions and processes that ground these contemporary manifestations in their socio-cultural contexts, we will employ a comparative approach to divination. Each speaker contributes a complementary disciplinary take on the phenomenon.

## ***PROGRAMME\****

### *AFTERNOON*

15:00 - 15:10	Introduction
15:10 - 16:00	<b>Dr Léon van Gulik:</b> <i>To Ask is Human, And to Divine Too: Types and Elements of Divinatory Practice</i>
16:00 - 16:15	Break
16:15 - 17:00	<b>Hella de Jong, MA:</b> <i>But What Does it all Mean? An Emic Perspective on the Art of Divination</i>
17:00 - 18:50	Dinner**

### *EVENING*

18:50 - 19:00	Opening evening programme
19:00 - 19:45	<b>Dr Renske Janssen:</b> <i>Cattle's Gut and Owlet's Wing: Divination in Ancient Rome</i>
19:45 - 20:30	<b>Prof. Wouter van Beek:</b> <i>Predicting the Past, Reviewing the Present: Divination in Africa</i>
20:30 - 20:45	Break
20:45 - 21:30	<b>Dr Jesper Sørensen (online):</b> <i>Gnosis by Chance: Cognitive Underpinnings of Divinatory Practices</i>
21:30 - 22:00	General discussion

\* During the programme, there is a manned bookstall at the venue dedicated to the symposium. Cash only.

\*\* The food court in Lipsius will be open for this occasion during dinner time. Various cold and warm buns and subs are available for purchase, as well as soup, drinks and snacks.

## Léon A. van Gulik

*Senior Lecturer ad interim and Honorary Research Fellow  
at Leiden University Centre for the Study of Religion*



# TO ASK IS HUMAN, AND TO DIVINE TOO

## Types and Elements of Divinatory Practice

### *ABSTRACT*

Humans are prone to read intentionality into the vagaries of happenstance. Ever watchful for any natural symbolism in our environment, we may see the cosmic order expressed in bird's flights, in the stars – even in licking flames or in the pitch-black surface of a dark mirror. Starting with the psychological underpinnings of these practices, I will first explain how our understanding of coincidences and our capacity to think in terms of meaning are the basis for any practices that involve the perceived ability to communicate with the other-than-human actors in the sacred world. This functional perspective on divination supports the identification of the key components of the divinatory act, which constitutes the second part of my talk: the client, the question (or purpose), the diviner, the procedure, the randomizer, the symbolic system (i.e., 'cosmology'), the answer, the ramifications and the context. I will then proceed to the third part of my presentation, in which I offer three ways to classify divinatory practices: (1) by motivation (i.e., passive versus active divination), (2) by technique (i.e., associative versus projective divination), and (3) by interaction (i.e., inductive versus interpretative and versus intuitive divination). Together, the functional definition, elemental analysis and classification will help to interrelate the perspectives of the other presentations.

### *BIOGRAPHY*

[Dr Léon van Gulik](#) graduated as a cultural psychologist and a scholar of religion at Radboud University, Nijmegen. He obtained his PhD At Tilburg University, with his dissertation *Moongazers & Trailblazers: Creative Dynamics in Low Country Wicca*. For several years now, Van Gulik has operated as Senior Lecturer ad interim at various universities (Groningen, Amsterdam, Nijmegen and Leiden). Currently, he is engaged in two research projects: one on strategies of religious self-legitimation and one on the notion of human atmospheres (i.e., the felt properties of specific places, times and situations).

# Hella de Jong

*Religious studies graduate and owner of Raven Coins*



## **BUT WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?**

### **An emic perspective on the art of divination**

#### *ABSTRACT*

I am a cleromancer, which means that to help somebody find guidelines for their future, I cast a 'lot' and read the patterns I perceive. In reaction to the opening lecture of this symposium, the art of divination will be explained within the context of our modern society. In a way, the reading of cards, sticks, stones – or in my case, coins – seems to be an antiquated art, no longer suitable for modern times and destined to die out. But is it? Like religion itself, which refuses to go away, even though we thought it would gradually disappear in the aftermath of the enlightenment, divination is still around. So what is the appeal? How do contemporary (western) diviners reconcile the meaning-seeking techniques of the oracles with the fact-seeking strategies of the modern world? Would not knowledge of the one exclude the value of the other? I will try to answer some of those questions in a short and personal talk. I will take you through the steps I take before I do a reading and offer insight on how these steps lead to a meaning-giving encounter with my clients. I aim for interactivity, so any questions you have always wanted to ask a modern oracle are welcome. Following the lecture, I will make myself available for questions and short three-coin-cast demonstrations over dinner.

#### *BIOGRAPHY*

[Hella de Jong, MA](#), has received her MA in the Study of Religion (cum laude) at Leiden University in 2015. During her study, she specialized in Modern Religious Movements and wrote a thesis on the Crystal Skull Movement to conclude her academic education. She has been a practising neo-Pagan for more than 25 years, active in both Druidry and Wicca. In 2019, under the nom de plume of Hella Raven, she published the Raven Coins Oracle, the world's first and only coin-based oracle.

**Renske Janssen**

*Independent researcher*



# **CATTLE'S GUT AND OWLET'S WING**

## **Divination in Ancient Rome**

### *ABSTRACT*

Divination was almost omnipresent in the Roman world and could be seen both as an essential part of maintaining the established order and as profoundly subversive. In this presentation, we will explore both sides of this coin. We will investigate what types of divination were used, what role(s) it could play in both public and private life, and who and what it was for. In particular, we will zoom in on divination's legal standing: how could Roman officials themselves be so actively involved in divination while trying to limit the practice at the same time?

### *BIOGRAPHY*

[Dr Renske Janssen](#) studied Classics in Leiden and obtained her doctorate in Ancient History at the same University in September 2020. Her dissertation, which is currently under contract for publication at Oxford University Press, focuses on legal interactions between the Roman authorities and marginalized religious groups and includes an in-depth analysis of the legal measures used to control divination up to the middle of the third century CE. As a researcher, dr. Janssen is particularly interested in how people in Classical Antiquity engaged with power structures and systems of authority, whether administrative or supernatural.

# Wouter E.A. van Beek

*Senior Researcher at the African Studies Centre Leiden*



## **PREDICTING THE PAST, REVIEWING THE PRESENT** **Divination in Africa**

### *ABSTRACT*

Divination always has been important in African cultures, and it still is. A range of mantic techniques is known on the continent. These are both technical and inspirational and are used in various situations. In this contribution, I will zoom in on two cultures, Kapsiki (Cameroon) and Dogon (Mali), whose technical divination systems offer answers to predominantly practical questions. Yet, the information derived from the fox or crab – the animals consulted – or the cowry shells – a widespread technique in West Africa – allows a glimpse into how these peoples engage with personal timelines, both their past and their future. Constructing their pathway into the future with the help of divination, they build individual and collective agency consonant with the basic tenets of their culture.

### *BIOGRAPHY*

[Prof. Wouter van Beek](#), a cultural anthropologist originally from Utrecht University, held the chair of Anthropology of Religion at Tilburg University till 2015 and is now Senior Researcher at the African Studies Centre Leiden. He has done extensive field research in Cameroon and Mali and has published extensively on these groups and their divination systems. At present, he heads a JP-ICH project for the preservation and digitalization of cultural heritage in Mali called DigiDogon.

## **Jesper S. Sørensen**

*Associate professor at the Department for the Study of Religion,  
Aarhus University (Denmark)*



## **GNOSIS BY CHANCE**

### **Cognitive underpinnings of divinatory practices**

#### *ABSTRACT*

Divination is a ubiquitous human phenomenon. Practically all cultures have developed specific, often ritualized, systems utilized to diagnose otherwise obscure causal relations and responsibilities, to gain access to otherwise hidden information, and to predict the future outcome of a specific endeavour. As a method for obtaining otherwise occult knowledge or information, applying cognitive models of information acquisition and verification is a natural step. What type of information is sought for, what type of procedures are involved in its production and how does the information gain authority? Further, distinct cognitive processes are elicited depending on if divinatory signs are understood as communicative or indexical and depending on the temporal orientation, that is, if the information sought for concerns the past, present or future relative to the ritual situation. In this paper, I shall discuss a number of the cognitive mechanisms involved and relate this to an overarching neurocognitive framework of predictive coding.

#### *BIOGRAPHY*

[Dr Jesper Frøkjær Sørensen](#) is Associate Professor in Comparative Religion at Aarhus University, Denmark, specializing in cognitive and evolutionary approaches to ritual and magic, social ontology and cultural evolution, cognitive historiography and cultural immunology. He is the author of *A Cognitive Theory of Magic* (2007).