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SPIRITS AND SPACE : ON MAKING ROOM FOR THE SACRED IN THE CITY.

Daniel Luciani

While the religious practice of monotheist faiths is characterized by a significant decline in Luxembourg (as in many other European countries), there has been a notable increase in spiritual practices that do not require adherence to a specific orthodox doctrine. In this context, spiritual practice becomes a widespread phenomenon drawing from personal interpretations as well as diverse and intertwined cultural influences such as American-Indian shamanism and Oriental wisdoms (which becomes evident in body techniques like yoga that are common nowadays). This has developed into a grassroots practice that depends more on practitioners' personal representations and commitment than on dogma or clerical authority.

In this setting, I will focus on the highly disparate and often ambiguous religious representations that shape these practices. To illustrate this, I will discuss two examples of ceremonies – the circle of chants and the sweat lodge – which demonstrate how ritual functions as a phenomenological and performative act that enables purification from the alienation of modern society and the renegotiation of relationship between individuals, allowing them, as they say, to "get connected to each other".

Drawing on insights from my PhD thesis (completed in 2023), I will then raise the question of the role of spatial frameworks in the making of a rightful ceremony. Spiritual practice, like any other form of social action, involves an arrangement in space and time. More specifically, ceremonies such as the sweat lodge and the circle of chants require a specific space and set-up, often expressing an opposition between the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane. What logic governs that particular configuration? What are the spatial requirements for such a ceremony to succeed and what does it offer to participants? How does the spatial framework shape their experience and enable them to connect with the Sacred?

While traditional monotheistic religions are firmly rooted in the geography of European countries, followers of such spiritual practices must create their own spaces in which to gather and perform rituals. Consequently, spiritual practice mostly relies on personal commitment to organize ceremonies in private homes, third places (like the Mesa in Esch/Alzette) or public places such as outdoor parks. All of these developments reflect broader societal changes that merit closer examination – also in terms of the public sector's role and responsibility.

DANIEL LUCIANI holds a doctorate in political and social sciences and teaches at the Lycée de Garçons Esch. His anthropological research focused on a range of spiritual practices found in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg that involve the intervention of a religious specialist, whether or not they are considered a "shaman." He is particularly interested in the ambivalent and flexible nature of spiritual practices (which refer to a heterodox universe of diffuse and malleable conceptions) as well as the resulting agency of the participant.

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Structure of a sweat lodge in Esch/Alzette. Photo by Daniel Luciani.