

# Initiatory Materials

## An Ethnography of Contemporary Alchemy in Sweden

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### **Abstract**

This article is an ethnographic study of spagyric alchemical practice, sometimes referred to by my informants as “the wet path,” which is centred on the making of elixirs. This article begins with an ethnographic vignette of how alchemy was taught in a group setting and then describes how the author became an alchemist’s apprentice during the course of an evening. Analytical perspectives on this ethnographic material lead to a discussion of the benefits of an ethnographic approach to esotericism. Finally, methodological issues pertaining to the qualitative study of contemporary esotericism are discussed. The article’s main argument is that the ethnography of contemporary esotericism can discern the practical aspects of esotericism that cannot be discovered or studied through textual studies alone, which is why ethnography can be a fruitful complement to the dominant historical focus on esotericism.

### **Keywords**

Contemporary esotericism; cultic milieu; alchemy; esoteric practice

## Entering the field

It is October 2014 in Lund, a small university town in southern Sweden, where an alchemical workshop is just about to begin. As I enter the rented downtown office space, my eyes are drawn to the centre of the room, where a small coffee table serves as an altar. There, among the burning candles, lie several magical tools: a pendulum; a little statue of Thoth; a knife; Tibetan bells; a small bottle containing a blue liquid; and a bigger, beautiful carafe adorned with a Catholic crucifix, which contains a yellowish liquid and gold flakes on the bottom.

The fifteen participants, including me, are seated on chairs in front of a white wall where the alchemist and workshop organiser, Chris, plugs an iPad into a socket. Then, he lights more candles and incense. The projector starts to hum and throws its square of light on the wall before us. The workshop begins.

Chris picks up the bottle and the carafe from the altar and holds them in front of us. “How many of you have seen the Matrix?” he asks.

Everyone, including me, raises their hand.

“This is the same principle,” he continues, and gives us the choice of drinking the golden elixir, “the red pill,” or the blue elixir made of water and caramel colour, “the blue pill.” Like Neo in *The Matrix*, the red pill will alert us to another reality. The majority of the participants choose the gold elixir. After some hesitation, I do too.

An alchemical image appears on the wall, depicting a bottle that resembles the one from which we just drank the elixir. “This is the Vessel,” Chris explains. “Where everything is contained.”

We are instructed to become like the alchemical vessel by emptying our minds. The Vessel is a bodily position, an attitude, and a visualisation technique. Chris demonstrates it on his assistant, saying, “I want to speak with the Vessel.”

The assistant changes his posture, straightens up. He places his hands on his knees, his face becoming expressionless and his gaze turning blank.

“To whom am I speaking?” asks Chris.

“You’re speaking with the Vessel,” replies the assistant in a hollow voice.

“What’s inside you?”

“Everything.”

“May I summon others from the Alchemical Garden?”

“You may.”

“Then I want to speak with the Doubting One,” says Chris, and switches the image on his iPad. A picture of the scientist Richard Dawkins appears. Several of the participants around me chuckle, but soon change their postures. In the corner of my eye I notice some of them leaning back on their chairs, crossing their arms, and frowning in an imitation of doubt.

Chris asks questions and people in the audience reply in their roles as the Doubting One. Next, an image of a child on a white horse appears; the tarot card of the Sun from the Rider-Waite deck. We assume the form of the child while Chris stresses that we need to have a playful approach and not be afraid to seem ridiculous. In this manner, through a series of alchemical images projected on the wall, we travel through the *Alchemical Garden*, where all the alchemical principles are to be found. Guided by Chris, we explore them in an interactive performance where we take on the alchemical roles by calling them forth in the Vessel.

When the journey through the garden reaches its end, we have taken on the roles of several alchemical figures, such as the Alchemist-Chemist and his opposite, the true Alchemist, the Green Lion, the Destroyer, the Suffering King, the Pelican, the Eagle, the Sun, the Moon, and the Alchemical Wedding. Concluding the workshop, Chris explains that we can call forth the characters of the Alchemical Garden at any time in the way he taught us, for physical well-being as well as a way towards spiritual enlightenment. The alchemical principles are inside us, he says, and can offer spiritual achievements as well as help us in our everyday lives.

In this article I present an ethnographic study of alchemical practice in contemporary Sweden, based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews.<sup>1</sup> Proceeding from the opening ethnographic vignette above, I will move on to a more detailed description of how alchemy was taught to me by an alchemist during the course of an evening. The following analysis complicates the notion of a psychologisation of magic, which in part stems from the groundbreaking study of modern occultism by anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann.<sup>2</sup> This leads me to a discussion of the benefits of an ethnographic approach to esotericism, as well as some of its general methodological issues.

The alchemical workshop described above was arranged by the newly started group *The Alchemical Room* and took place in Lund. I was invited to participate by the organiser, Chris, a man in his thirties who has been active in the occult milieu in Sweden for more than a decade. He was a student of Tommy Westlund and Katarina Falkenberg, who founded The Alchemical Academy in 2006 in

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews quoted in this article were conducted by the author in 2015 and translated from Swedish to English by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Wouter J. Hanegraaff drew on Luhrmann's study to support his theory of "disenchanted magic" in the article "How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World," *Religion* 33 (2003): 357–80. Egil Asprem took issue with this theory in "Magic Naturalized? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley's Scientific Illuminism," *Aries* 8 (2008): 139–65, to which I will return below.

Stockholm. I had the opportunity to participate in some of the events arranged by them and also to conduct a lengthy interview with Tommy and Katarina.

The Alchemical Academy offers various smaller courses and workshops as well as two-year-long education programmes, at a monetary cost. They also arrange salons and theatrical performances, which people with various affiliations to the cultic milieu of Sweden attend. I refer here to Colin Campbell's flexible concept of the "cultic milieu" to designate the broader social current.<sup>3</sup> Kaplan and Lööv write that "forbidden knowledge is the coin of the realm, a place in which ideas, theories and speculations are to be found, exchanged, modified and, eventually, rejected."<sup>4</sup> However, some people in the cultic milieu do not only entertain "ideas, theories and speculations," they do things as well, both solitary and/or together with other people. Therefore, I find Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's concept of the "community of practice" well suited to pinpoint those milieus in which practice is shared and skills are honed.<sup>5</sup> For this purpose, we may fuse the two concepts and speak of cultic communities of practice.

By offering practical training in the form of recurring courses and education programmes, the Alchemical Academy has cultivated a community of practice and can be regarded as a well-established hub in the cultic milieu of Sweden. The Alchemical Room operated in a similar fashion, albeit on a smaller scale, arranging lectures and workshops with practical exercises. In this sense, the Alchemical Room is a branch-out of the community of practice established by Tommy and Katarina.

As a part of their spiritual "Great Work," these alchemists practiced what they called the "wet path" of alchemy — spagyry in the tradition of Paracelsus — that centres on the making of elixirs. The elixirs are based on herbs and sometimes metals, and are linked to specific correspondences determining the effects. They can be made and used for general well-being, and can even be distributed to others, but also, ultimately, become an initiatory material towards the ultimate goal of attaining gnosis, interchangeably called "the Philosophers' Stone." Making elixirs can involve both ritual, spells, and prayers as well as instruments and equipment of various kinds, all of which it takes knowledge and skill to handle.

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<sup>3</sup> First introduced in Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), and further developed in Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 12–25.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv, "Introduction," in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 36.

I found this contemporary alchemy to be a field rife with analytic potential, particularly when the mix of tradition and creativity, experiment and ritual, as well as how alchemy is taught and learned is considered. But it was above all the emphasis on material substances that caught my interest. Why were my informants investing time and money in *material* laboratory work as a part of their spiritual work? Whatever the answer, it certainly bore little resemblance to Hanegraaff's depiction of a disenchanted and essentially non-material magic characteristic of modern magicians.<sup>6</sup> Here, participant observation may add another piece to the puzzle of modern magic, by making visible the differences between practice and discourse. Getting to know the practice from the inside may also help us to raise other questions than those pertaining to text, such as how worldviews and beliefs are articulated. This supports the main argument of this article: that the ethnography of contemporary esotericism can discern the practical aspects of esotericism that cannot be discovered or studied through textual studies alone, which is why ethnography can be a fruitful complement to the historiography of esotericism.

As an anthropologist, my purpose was to study alchemy as *lived religion*; that is, how contemporary alchemists understood and practiced it, regardless of whether it corresponded with historical alchemy from an academic point of view. While the emic reception of and use of history in practical application is an interesting avenue of research, it is beyond the scope of this article. Here, I refer solely to emic expressions of alchemical theory, as it was communicated to me through interviews and emic literature, such as Tommy and Katarina's forthcoming book on alchemy, which they gave me the opportunity to read in advance.<sup>7</sup>

At the invitation of Chris, I attended several of the events he arranged in 2015. Most were not arranged within the framework of the Alchemical Room, as Chris had several other esoteric undertakings going on. Alchemy was, however, a constant reference point and meta-theory for all these practices, which included ritual magic and celebrations of Gnostic Masses. During one such event I met an alchemist who, for the purpose of anonymity, will be named John. When I had described my research interests during our initial conversation, John invited me to his house in order to teach me the basic procedures for making alchemical elixirs during the course of an evening in December 2015.

John lived in a large city in Sweden, had a well-paid job, and participated regularly in esoteric group activities, although the main bulk of his work was

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<sup>6</sup> Hanegraaff, "How Magic Survived," 369–71.

<sup>7</sup> Katarina Falkenberg and Tommy Westlund, *Alkemi: det gudomliga verket* (Stockholm: Arca Dei Förlag, 2018).

solitary and carried out on a daily basis. Apart from alchemy he also practiced ritual magic, and he has been active in the cultic milieu of Sweden for several years. In the following, I will give an ethnographic account of my evening as John's apprentice, for the purpose of a case study that exemplifies general aspects of the alchemical practice I studied, as well as methodological issues pertaining to the qualitative study of contemporary esotericism.

### The alchemist's apprentice

To my informants, making elixirs is a lengthy process with the ultimate goal of attaining the Philosophers' Stone, which they conceptualise both as an elixir and a state of gnosis in the alchemist who has attained the Stone. To this end, my informants bring material substances, such as a specific plant, through the seven alchemical operations of calcination, dissolution, separation, conjunction, fermentation, distillation, and coagulation. This process has four phases, each of which corresponds to different challenges and opportunities: *nigredo* (the black), *albedo* (the white), *citrinitas* (the yellow) and *rubedo* (the red). While the material substance moves through these phases, the alchemist correspondingly does the same, ultimately reaching gnosis and the Philosophers' Stone.

In historical alchemical sources, the phases and operations are often portrayed in a suggestive and symbolic imagery, serving as a source of knowledge for those who can interpret them. The website of the Alchemical Academy states that: "The alchemical archetypes are indeed a coded language to the profane eye, but with the aid of the keys of Wisdom they are able to increase one's knowledge about the individual and collective Self, the matrix of reality, as well as the Cosmos as a whole."<sup>8</sup>

Alchemical images can also serve as a decorative inspiration in everyday life: John had several such pictures framed on the walls of his home, which drew my attention. Also, two different altars stood in his living room, next to well-stocked bookshelves. One was dedicated to his ancestors, and the other to alchemy. There, on the elongated alchemical altar, lay a blackened, shrunken apple on a bed of sand, protected inside a bell jar. "This is also an observation of a dissolution," John explained, "and by identifying with this damned little apple, one can learn a lot about one's own mortality." He pointed to a framed picture hanging above the altar: "Or, for example, this old woodcut, with the

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<sup>8</sup> "About Alchemy," The Alchemical Academy, accessed September 28, 2017, [http://www.alkemiskaakademin.se/eng/?page\\_id=29](http://www.alkemiskaakademin.se/eng/?page_id=29).

black raven of *nigredo*, this guy enclosed in a vessel, and the Sulphur and the Mercury are separated and reignited by the elements;<sup>9</sup> the Fire and the Spirit and the Planets up here and the duality here.”

Evidently, both the rotting apple and the woodcut represents *nigredo*, the disintegration and decomposition phase of the alchemical process. Another image of particular importance was framed on the wall: a reproduction of an etching from the German alchemist Heinrich Khunrath’s book *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae aeternae*, printed in 1595. The plate is called “The Beginning of the Great Work,” and John explained its imagery:

Here we have a prayer tent, here is the alchemist and here we have an incense container. Incense is generally regarded as prayer, taking one’s intentions up to the lofty skies. We have some books here, [and] we have a lot of inscriptions here, which say something like: “Happy I am who has the Lord as my guide.” So here’s the Mercury aspect: it’s the spiritual, ascending prayer work, a mysterious work of meditation. And here we have the laboratory; we have an oven here, a little hard to see. We have a coal bucket, which is meant to feed the fire; we have a bellows, which is the element of Air that supports the fire, makes it hotter [...] [and] we have two pillars here that maintain this oven —

As I was eager to prove myself as a worthy apprentice, I chimed in with the names of the two pillars: “*Experientia* and *ratio*?” To which John replied:

Yes, precisely, this is *ratio*: you should not space out, you should not build castles of air, you should stick to “but what do I really do.” *Experientia* is that you rely on your own experience, but also on the experiences of others. You do not have to reinvent the wheel; you can drink Tommy’s elixir and avoid lying in the pit for

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<sup>9</sup> Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury are the three foundational alchemical principles, encompassing both the spiritual and the material. As such, they are different from the chemical substances with the same names. Tommy Westlund describes them in relation to the picture “The Beginning of the Great Work” from Khunrath’s book: “The left side, the oratory, relates to the Divine Spirit and is thus associated with alchemical mercury. It is the vital life-force which exists in the air we breathe, the subtle feminine power, wherefore it is on the left or passive side on the drawing. The right side, the laboratory, has to do with consciousness and the soul, and is associated with alchemical sulphur. It is the inner fire, the subtle masculine power and the true will, and expresses character and colour. Since it is active, it is being illustrated on the right, active, side of the drawing. The middle part of the room, as well as the whole round form of the composition, is associated with alchemical salt. It is the matrix or body wherein sulphur and mercury acts (and initially lies hidden), and is thus mediator, compound, fixity, tenacity and focus.” Tommy Westlund, “The Alchemical Room,” accessed July 1, 2017, <http://alkemiskaakademin.se/The%20Alchemical%20Room.pdf>, 4–5.

three years. And this then [pointing to the oven] is the Sulphur principle; that is, the will, projected. Actually, one can call it “lab chemistry” or “magic ritual.” This is the active work, while this [points to the prayer tent] is the passive work.

After having contemplated this 400-year-old picture and had the symbolism explained to me, John led me to the kitchen threshold where he instructed me to close my eyes and to visualise the following guided meditation:

Close your eyes and relax. Let go of your everyday concerns. We are now beginning the work of alchemy and so we take a small step forward and leave the everyday world behind. Astrally we descend ten steps on a stairway. One, two, three, four, five...and we feel the surroundings getting cooler and darker...six, seven, eight, nine, ten. And now we are standing in front of a heavy door, made of oak and covered in alchemical signs, magical formulas that someone has engraved on it. And astrally we reach out and grab a gold key that hangs beside the door and we unlock the door and open it, and we open our eyes a little and enter the Alchemical Room. We close the door behind us, pass through a small hallway and enter here. And here we are.

I opened my eyes again and crossed the threshold to the kitchen, which, through this brief ritual framing, turned into an alchemical space. So that nothing would be lost on me, John pointed to the crucifix on the wall: “Here we have the prayer tent.” He pointed to the gas burner standing on the table: “We have the oven and we have the table where we study these things.” I could not help but to also notice a fire extinguisher ready at hand in one of the corners. “Safety first,” John explained.

He proceeded to open one of the kitchen doors and pulled his alchemical equipment out from the shelves: protective glasses, a lighter, a jar marked with a sigil which, he explained, belonged to an Olympic spirit who is helpful for alchemical work. Inside the jar was a small porcelain crucible, filled with a white-greyish powder that looked like chalk. John lit the gas burner and placed the crucible on top. His goal was to produce “the pure salt” by bringing this substance, filled with impurities, through the alchemical operations and phases:

But this salt, to be honest, it’s not the pure salt but this is a dirty salt. So what I’ve done before is that I’ve had this on the fire, burned and burned and burned and burned, but what’s happening is that it turns black, it melts and becomes disgusting again. It looks very white and clean now, or relatively so. So we have a problem here. We have an alchemical problem. We have something that refuses to become pure. And then I’ve read about a method that can help solve this problem, and it’s repeatedly taking distilled water, maybe so little [he poured a drop], and dissolving this.



Drop after drop, John poured distilled water over the salt. “We take the crystalline form,” he explained, “the form that has decided to not change, and dissolve it in water.” But before long the salt looked even dirtier, transformed into boiling grey goo. While we observed the mixture change over the flame, John recounted an anecdote of a more successful alchemical working that Chris witnessed Tommy perform:

[...] Tommy is finished with his Work, he possesses the Stone, and Tommy was making an elixir. He had a copper pot on his stove, he had a fistful of herbs, I don’t know what kind of operation he was performing exactly, but he threw the herbs in the pot and it sounded ‘swoosh’ for about a minute or so and then the herbs turned to white ashes. In this paradigm, this symbolises that he has nothing left to burn, so it just sounds ‘swoosh’: finished.

Later on, he added: “If you are finished with the Work, no problems. Obviously, I’m not finished: the salt is melting.”

I went on to ask John if this could be seen as an opportunity for falsification: “you can prove you have the Stone both to yourself and others by demonstrating it in your pot, like swoosh, this is my level, you can see it in my pot.”

“Yes,” John replied, “if you can make gold on the higher planes then you can make gold on the material level as well.”

The point here is that one who has achieved the Philosophers’ Stone can transmit it to the material world. This notion is based on correspondence theory, with the spiritual intertwined and mirroring the material world, and vice versa. Gold corresponds with the Sun and, in extension, also with gnosis, which is often regarded as the ultimate illumination.

One can, so to speak, see gnosis in the pot: anyone who has found the Philosophers’ Stone, or gnosis, can transfer this state to the outer world. But for John it moved forward a bit slower. He turned the flame up and pondered:

Why is it turning green? Perhaps because I’m actually working with Venus and Mars right now, that I have a Venus-related problem that I have to deal with, whatever it may be. It is up to me to somehow figure it out. Or perhaps the way to deal with it is to let this burn incredibly long, until the green is completely consumed. You can choose different roads: either I deal with my attitudes to life and love, or I burn this substance until my attitudes to life and love is completely consumed.

Later, he showed me a jar filled with cloudy apple wine, on its alchemical trajectory to becoming a purified Venus elixir. He told me of the intense experiences that can be had when performing such an alchemical operation:

I had a jar [...] with the goo here, matter itself, and when it had rotted enough and I decided that the process must be ready, this dissolution process, then you are supposed to filter it. So you take it, you pour it into a filter and let the Sulphur-Mercury, as it becomes, drain down. And then you have the dead body left [in the filter]. A few times when I've done this, I've been completely damned tripped by filtering goo through a coffee filter. I'm like, "No, this can't be right," but yes, I become completely "wow." You just float away and get strange visions.

There, in front of the kitchen sink, John connected with the elixir to such a degree that its way through the coffee filter gave him a spiritual experience. "When you do this on the outside it happens on the inside," he explained. "It is a manifestation of an inner process." It might strike the reader as contradictory that something done on the outside affects the inside while at the same time manifesting an inner process, and I will explore this further below. Concluding his teaching that evening, John offered me to join him in drinking a hawthorn elixir, which corresponds with Mars. He mixed a few of the dark red drops with water in a shot glass. We made a toast and drank it down, bottoms up. Then I got up to leave, crossing the kitchen threshold again.

No transmutation of substances was achieved that evening, but for me, it would become an important lesson: an intellectual transmutation, so to speak. I left John's apartment late that night with the bitter taste of hawthorn lingering in my mouth. I walked on the icy pavements towards the bus station and felt increasingly anxious as the winter darkness enveloped me. Familiar with the destructive connotations of Mars I could not shake a growing, oppressive feeling. Would I slip on an icy path and break my bones? Would I be attacked by someone lurking in the shadows? Or would the bus crash?

Safely back in my own apartment that night I felt quite ridiculous, but also realised I had just had a lesson in the ethnographic method of participant observation. I will explore this experience further in the discussion on methodology below, but first I will turn my attention to some of the analytical perspectives that can be gleaned from the ethnography presented so far.

### **Analytical potentials of ethnographic materials**

The materiality of the elixir was often articulated as being a "magical mirror" to my informants, where matter is a sort of litmus test of spiritual accomplishments. At the same time, when I explicitly asked questions about the importance of materiality, the importance of it was often relativised. When, during the interview, I asked Katarina if it would be enough to simply visualise

the substances, working with them astrally instead of physically, she answered: “Well, *need* them? You don’t really need them. You need the substances, but all minerals, all substances, they are already in your own body. You have everything here, you have your forge, but in order to mirror, facilitate, teach, [and] test, then it is good to have a medium to work with.”

This quotation expresses the idea of matter as mirror for a spiritual process, where the inner process affects the outer, material process rather than the other way around. It also epitomises the unnecessaryness of matter, a notion that several informants expressed during interviews. It struck me as slightly contradictory that they devoted time and money to material laboratory work, if they could just as easily do it internally, or astrally, instead. As was readily observable during my fieldwork, engaging in physical practice with material substances and instruments mattered to my informants, as they invested their efforts in it and found it worthwhile to do so.

This connects to the debate concerning the “disenchantment of magic” that I mentioned above. As we have seen, materiality, including the body, can be seen as profoundly entangled with spirituality and enchantment, not on a “separate-but-connected” plane, as Luhmann, and Hanegraaff after her, have suggested, but in matter and flesh.<sup>10</sup> This could be seen as a re-enchantment of everyday life on an individual level, although I tend to lean towards the standpoint of, among others, the sociologist Nancy T. Ammerman, who has written that “in many places the everyday world has always been infused with spiritual presence and needs no ‘re-enchantment.’”<sup>11</sup>

By making a case for the naturalised magic of Aleister Crowley, Egil Asprem argues that the psychologisation of magic that Hanegraaff has pointed out as a characteristic of modern occultism is “only *one* possible way of negotiating magic with a modern scientific worldview, among several others.”<sup>12</sup> Asprem’s criticism is supported by my ethnographic findings, albeit for partly different reasons. Illustrating and analysing the complexity of contemporary esoteric currents is one of the ways in which ethnographic studies may contribute to the study of esotericism.

“You don’t have to believe in anything,” Katarina explained to me during the interview, “but you see effects, and that’s when people are transformed, not because they believe in everything that happens or that we’re saying ‘this is how it is.’ But they do these workings and the transformation takes place [...] so it’s

<sup>10</sup> Luhmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 274–82; Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived,” 370.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, “Studying Everyday Religion: Challenges for the Future,” in: *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 223.

<sup>12</sup> Asprem, “Magic Naturalized?” 142.

not a belief-tradition, but a gnosis-tradition, through experiments with yourself, or herbs, [or] metals.” This quote emphasises practice over belief, and experience over doctrine, as well as the importance of a trial-and-error approach to alchemy. This notion is further expressed when Tommy, during the same interview, likens alchemy to cooking to the point that experiment and ritual seem to be interchangeable: “If we work with alchemy as cooking, then we can follow the same recipe and it will turn out some days completely perfect and other times [...] not, although we have followed the same recipe to point and dot. And we work so much with both rituals, experiments, and trial and error.” Tommy draws on the alchemical tradition to explain this concept: “the two most important pillars are *ratio*, you have to know the theory and concepts, and then *experientia*, the experimental part, and we see those two pillars a lot in alchemical pictures and among alchemists already in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”

John, Chris, Katarina, and Tommy respectively referred to the two pillars of alchemy, *experientia* and *ratio*, as an important foundation for their work. Through the interviews and participant observation I soon learned that the historical texts and images were an important source of knowledge to my informants, but that the interpreted message can be renegotiated by the results obtained from laboratory work. Alchemical theory, as my informants expressed it, appeared experimental, open, and fluid, and their alchemy based on the learning through experience that trial and error entails. The experiment is central, and it is through experiments that one generally improves as an alchemist.

However, according to my informants, spiritual achievements can be obtained in a different way as well: *transmission* does not require the training of skills, but nonetheless bestows a leap from one level of insight to another. As John put it: “*experientia* is that you rely on your own experience, but also on the experiences of others. You do not have to reinvent the wheel; you can drink Tommy’s elixir and avoid lying in the pit for three years [i.e. going through the same ordeal].”

John also described the ingestion of the elixir as “a mini initiation that exposes one to this power; a transmission of my process to you, [and] so a form of initiation even if you’re not going to fall off the chair.” His description of the Philosophers’ Stone clearly illustrates the idea of transmission:

Here we have a person in front of us who has gone through the whole process and has found the Philosophers’ Stone [...] this person can initiate someone else in finding the Philosophers’ Stone too. It is called projection. And in this sense, this person is the physical representation of the Philosophers’ Stone, and can then transform someone else into gold, whatever it means. I’m not there, so I cannot say what it is, but it’s how it’s usually said, that if you have the Philosophers’ Stone,

you can turn someone else into the Philosophers' Stone. And it's a catalytic effect: the Philosophers' Stone is not consumed, it only transfers its nature to something else, and the ultimate goal is that everything becomes gold.

The notion of transmission can also be linked to the tendency to ascribe agency to the elixir, as it transfers its essence to the one who ingests it. But it also signifies that what happens to the substance in the alchemical process correspondingly happens to the alchemist, as when John connects with the elixir to such a degree that its way through the coffee filter results in a spiritual experience. Another anecdote from John exemplifies the imparting of agency to materials:

When you do laboratory work with stuff, it becomes alchemical whether you like it or not, once you have opened that door. Then it's quite hard to get out. So I would just try out distilling with my distillation machine, with this mead, because before I was going to do something real I would just test and see how it works. But then my life became a living hell again. My girlfriend started shouting and screaming [...] and people at work were getting fired. So I told Chris that my life is a mess, what is this? He asks, "Have you been doing any strange invocation?" "No," I answer, "I've only done a test distillation." "Stop, what do you mean, test distillation?! You cannot just test distillate! A distillation is a rectification of your spirit!"

Here the effect of distillation appears to be independent from John's intentions — it is the substance moving through the machine that affects John, rather than the other way around.

It is difficult to draw any general conclusions about how material objects change their agency when incorporated in alchemical practice. No firm distinctions between matter and spirit can be drawn. Different historical and theoretical perspectives, such as ontologies and epistemologies, seem to interact quite effortlessly in my informants' alchemical practice. That I, the researcher, raise questions may stem from a somewhat habitual fallacy to think in the binary terms of what separates religion from science, belief from doubt, and a pre-modern past from the modern present.

As the anthropologist Bruno Latour has proposed, such binary thinking is a common delusion of "modernity," where the "pre-modern" conflation of subject/object, human/non-human and nature/culture has been purged through categorical separation. But, according to Latour, this "purification" is basically self-deception on the part of us "Moderns," because we only think like this in theory. In practice, purification is constantly mediated by breaches of categories that generate hybrids, by crossbreeding the very same categories that had previously been singled out. Hybrids are created by attributing agency to ob-

jects.<sup>13</sup> Following Latour, materiality did not lose its magical qualities other than at a discursive level. In practice, modern man continued to treat artefacts like living things. This implies that ambiguities at the level of theory can be resolved at the level of practice. A similar point is made by anthropologist Annemarie Mol: “Ontologies are not exclusive. They allow for interferences, partial connections. Sharing practices.”<sup>14</sup> And practice may well be the key to resolve clashing boundaries. I will return to this notion in the concluding section.

According to my informants, the elixir can transmute other substances into its own essence, which in its “purest” state is nothing less than gnosis. In this sense, elixirs can be regarded as what I prefer to call *initiatory materials*. Initiatory materials propel the alchemist closer to gnosis, but may also have other effects, such as bestowing health and balance to body and soul. Well-being and enjoyment is indeed an important aspect of esoteric practice,<sup>15</sup> one that could be studied further if we approach esotericism as lived in individual, everyday life.

Within the walls of John’s house there were no clear boundaries between everyday and ritual place. The rotten apple under the glass cup in the living room served as a constant reminder of alchemical transformation. John swiftly transformed his kitchen into Khunrath’s alchemical room, where the alchemical oven came in the shape of a storm cooker, plastic protective glasses, and a fire extinguisher unobtrusively mingled with a crucifix and the seal of an Olympic spirit.

Elixirs are, in my opinion, initiatory materials in which a fusion of substance and practice, content and form, essence and process can take place for the alchemist. The elixir is made, at least in part, by physical labour. This practice, the *making*, blurs the boundaries between ritual and experiment, spirit and matter, so that no firm distinctions can be drawn on the part of the researcher. To the alchemists themselves, the elixir seems to manifest as well as condense the work that has produced it. To drink the elixir can thus be an act in which inner and outer, spirituality and materiality are woven together. It also applies to the researcher, who by drinking the elixir in a sense also drinks her field, gets it under her skin.

During my brief time as an apprentice it became abundantly clear to me that it takes exercise and skill to become a successful alchemist, particularly

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<sup>13</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 33, in particular.

<sup>14</sup> Annemarie Mol, “Other Words: Stories from the Social Studies of Science, Technology, and Medicine,” *Theorizing the Contemporary*, Cultural Anthropology website, accessed January 13, 2014, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/472-other-words-stories-from-the-social-studies-of-science-technology-and-medicine>.

<sup>15</sup> This is a point that Wouter J. Hanegraaff has also made in *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 116–18.

when handling the laboratory equipment. Instruments, understood along the lines of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, can become an extension of the body as they become habitual through practice, which in turn alters our perception of the world (if ever so slightly): "To habituate oneself to a hat, an automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one's own body. Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments."<sup>16</sup>

Anthropological theory of embodiment, which is underpinned by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, has put a particularly strong emphasis on practice as a necessary venue of study if cultural dynamics are to be understood at all.<sup>17</sup> From this point of view, practice may indeed resolve the theoretical ambiguity between subject and object, materiality and spirit by simply entwining them. This view on practice, where new physical habits can alter our existence, generates methodological consequences for the ethnographic researcher who, by default, habituates herself to a field. This raises methodological issues that will be discussed next, in the concluding section.

### **Towards an ethnography of contemporary esotericism**

For some time now, scholars of esotericism have pointed out that practice is an area of esotericism that could benefit from further study. Two decades after Luhrmann's groundbreaking study, Kennet Granholm pioneered the use of ethnographic methods in the field of contemporary esotericism. Both his PhD thesis and his more current work demonstrate the benefits of an ethnographic approach to esotericism.<sup>18</sup> In two recent articles, Egil Asprem has contributed to the study of esoteric practices as well as arguing for the importance of doing so.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012 [1962]), 144–45.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Csordas is one of the leading figures of this embodiment theory. For an excellent introduction, see "Introduction: the Body as Representation and Being-in-the-World," in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. by Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–24.

<sup>18</sup> Kennet Granholm, *Embracing the Dark: The Magic Order of Dragon Rouge — Its Practice in Dark Magic and Meaning Making* (Åbo: Åbo akademis förlag, 2005); and *idem*, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Egil Asprem, "Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 17–50; and *idem*, "Esotericism and the Scholastic Imagination: The Origins of Esoteric Practice in Christian Kataphatic Spirituality," *Correspondences* 4 (2016): 3–36.

In his introductory text, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Hanegraaff has a whole chapter devoted to practice in esotericism, emphasising its importance as well as underscoring the fact that studies of such practices are scarce.<sup>20</sup>

As exemplified by my own material, an ethnographic approach is uniquely suited for studying practice while it is taking place. Through participant observation, the particulars of practice can be experienced, discerned, and examined. As an unfolding event, practice differs from its representation in text. For instance, worldviews can be expressed in written or spoken statements, but practice does not necessarily harbour any worldviews waiting to be decoded. Participating in the practice may illuminate interesting differences between theory and practice, such as theoretically downplaying the importance of materiality but engaging significantly with it in practice. By carrying out participant observation the researcher can “privilege the moment,” as the ritual theorist Gavin Brown puts it. When studying rituals, a focus on the ritual script alone is insufficient according to Brown, “not because the script is understood to have no or little bearing on the nature of ritual action but rather, because the script communicates little about what really takes place as ritual actions unfold.”<sup>21</sup>

Esotericism, with its abundance of rituals, could profit from an ethnographic approach. Participant observation is uniquely suited for experiencing the minute particulars of action, in the moments it is carried out. This could be helpful in teasing out concepts like initiation and gnosis, by taking their practical dimensions into account. For instance, attaining “higher knowledge” such as gnosis has been the goal of many esoteric currents, as well as being a frequent component of definitions of esotericism. As Granholm has remarked, the “term ‘higher knowledge’ says very little by itself, but by including a more focused perspective on specific esoteric currents it is possible to gain more detailed insights into the social workings of specific esoteric groups.”<sup>22</sup>

While texts can disclose the prescriptions for attainment, worldviews, and propositional beliefs, one might ask if gnosis ever is achieved without work. If some of this work is practical in nature, it should be of interest to us. Of course, the experience of fieldwork often ends in text, such as this article. This calls for a calibrated terminology that can differentiate between symbols, language and practice while simultaneously accounting for their entanglement.

With the passing of time, ethnographic accounts also become historical contributions. Theories come and go, but a detailed description of the field endures.

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<sup>20</sup> Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 102–18.

<sup>21</sup> Gavin Brown, “Theorizing ritual as performance: explorations of ritual indeterminacy,” *Journal Of Ritual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 11.

<sup>22</sup> Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment*, 38.



Take, for instance, anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard's influential monograph *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, in which his theoretical framework may be outdated but the descriptive ethnography endures by virtue of its detailed and vivid account of a culture long since gone.<sup>23</sup> As such, it has become an invaluable historical document and may provide data for new studies.

Those familiar with the interpretation of texts will find that ethnographic data such as fieldnotes and transcribed interviews behave much like other genres of text when we approach them analytically. In ethnography, it is common advice to take indiscriminate notes, writing down occurrences and details that may feel irrelevant, since patterns tend to appear in retrospect. Choosing what to focus on is always an analytical choice that is often based on the researcher's personal theoretical inclinations. Fieldnotes are often considered to be the beginning of the analytical process, mediating between raw data and analysis, memory and text. The researcher then discards some details and chooses to focus on others, which is why reflexivity, the ability to be self-critical as well as self-analysing, is so essential to ethnography. The reflexive goal is to reach a transparent account of the research process, making visible the blueprint and the scaffolding of the construction.<sup>24</sup>

Much depends on the situation at hand and the researcher's positioning in the field: observation may entail different levels of participation, from not being involved at all to "going native," where the researcher becomes completely immersed the field, in some cases never to return.<sup>25</sup> But unless such a complete participation occurs, the researcher tends to remain in an intermediate world that can be conducive to research, particularly if, with the aid of reflexivity, one manages to analytically pinpoint the oscillations between proximity and distance, analysis and participation.

In the field of contemporary alchemy in Sweden, I was positioned as a student rather than a researcher, which made it possible to have the practice as well as the theory explained to me step-by-step. Being in a learning situation, as an apprentice, facilitated understanding from the inside. Guided by John, the 400-year-old picture from Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae aeternae* was vividly animated to me. By instructing me, John took me along on an *education of attention* where: "To show something to somebody is to cause it to be seen or otherwise experienced — whether by touch, taste, smell, or hearing — by that other person."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed discussion of reflexivity and other fundamental methodological concepts in ethnography, see Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner are two famous examples of anthropologists who went native and stayed native. See Robert J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans* (London: Routledge, 2003), 39–46.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Liveliness, Dwelling and Skill* (London:

In *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard ambiguously states: “If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts.”<sup>27</sup> He also speculates that if anthropologists in general are aware that the engagement with the people they study might transform them, then sometimes, “in a subtle kind of way and possibly unknown to themselves they have [...] ‘gone native.’”<sup>28</sup> My own experience of fieldwork is a small, but telling, case in point. I did not believe that the elixirs could affect me in the ways my informants believed they could. However, I was affected, as indicated by the uncanny experience I had as I walked from John’s house late that night. By applying reflexivity and directly addressing such shifts, it is possible to illuminate the particulars at play in gaining spiritual experiences, which may also be indicative of similar processes in, for instance, religious conversion.

Tanya Luhrmann is a good example of this: since writing *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft* she has proceeded to investigate how learning is central to spiritual experiences, such as hearing God speak.<sup>29</sup> In a recent article, Luhrmann has acknowledged that she was deeply affected by her fieldwork for *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, and had magical experiences of her own, although she did not divulge this in her monograph.<sup>30</sup> She proposes that being a magician or a Christian is about more than just learning a certain discourse, it is about confirming discourse through experience: “I want to emphasize the difference between learning the categories and learning the practice, and I want to point out that my own bodily feelings forced me to recognize that categories are not enough.”<sup>31</sup> She also underscores the methodological advantage one may get from momentary absorption in the field: “The person who writes about religious experience may write differently if she has been knocked sideways in an invocation. If you have heard the mermaids singing, you are more likely to ask people about mermaids in different ways than if you have not.”<sup>32</sup> This points to the possibility of posing new research questions by engaging in participant observation, and learning esoteric practices from the practitioners themselves.

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Routledge, 2011[2000]), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Evans-Pritchard. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic*, 244.

<sup>28</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic*, 245.

<sup>29</sup> Tanya M. Luhrmann, “How Do You Learn to Know that it is God Who Speaks?” in *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches*, ed. by David C. Berliner and Ramon Sarró (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Tanya M. Luhrmann, “What Counts as Data?” in *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, ed. by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Luhrmann, “What Counts as Data?” 220.

<sup>32</sup> Luhrmann, “What Counts as Data?” 233.

When doing as our informants do, we habituate ourselves to their milieu and might share similar experiences as them, as both Evans-Pritchard and Luhrmann have indicated. Fieldwork may thus alter us in subtle ways, regardless of our belief. Participating, drinking elixirs, and choosing the red pill instead of the blue, serves as a powerful statement in itself. Propositional statements, such as “I believe,” are of less importance to the effects of the act. You cannot argue with an elixir.<sup>33</sup>

Taking up the role of apprentice gave me a methodological advantage, but it also illuminated the process of *learning* involved in practical alchemy. This experience elicited questions that may be asked of other cultic communities of practice as well, for instance: are there any similar initiatory materials and, if so, are they performed, constructed, and sustained in specific ways? What skills are honed and practiced? What modes of pedagogy underpin the concept and the practice of initiation? Under what circumstances are tradition and ritual script renegotiated through practice?

Also, by admitting Luhrmann’s emphasis on the difference between learning the categories and learning the practice, we might want to investigate what relationships may exist between text and practice, particularly between ritual script and ritual performance. How are ideas, theories, and speculations entangled with people organising events, performing rituals? How are theories and practices entangled and worked out in communities of practice? Ethnographic methods can help us answer such questions, which might in turn lead to new ways to account for change and what is sometimes called “invention.”

My findings suggest that experiential learning and the acquisition of skill are of central importance to individual achievements in alchemy, which may well be true of other esoteric currents as well. In a recent article, Asprem highlights the importance of practical learning: “Talking with angels, or traveling on the astral plane, are skills that can be trained. The objective of any explanatory theory of kataphatic practice must therefore be to understand the causal factors that allow such training to take place, and to identify the material, bodily, and mental techniques that practitioners have at their disposal in order to hone the skill.”<sup>34</sup> As this article has argued, ethnographic methods are well suited for studying practice as it takes place and unfolds, and by doing so, open new ways to further our understanding of esoteric currents.

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<sup>33</sup> Here I am paraphrasing “You can’t argue with a song”, the famous quotation by anthropologist Maurice Bloch in “Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation,” *Archives européennes de sociologie* 15 (1974): 71.

<sup>34</sup> Asprem, “Explaining the Esoteric,” 19.

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## Interviews

Tommy and Katarina, November 4, 2015. 1 hr. 35 min.

John, December 15, 2015. 3 hr. 20 min.