Summer Ethnography Projects 2024-5

Department of Anthropology - London School of Economics

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Balancing Tradition and Modernity

by Aminata Sesay

In 2022, I met Sarah, a Western-educated South African diplomat's daughter based in Japan. Her experiences of adapting to Japanese society and forming connections sparked my curiosity about how Japanese youth culture is shaped and what it entails. The duality of Japanese youth culture, a balance between deep respect for tradition and the desire for individual expression, stood out to me. This cultural interplay reflects broader societal dynamics, creating unique and evolving fashion trends. I engaged with Sarah's social circles to gain authentic perspectives on youth fashion and culture, and travelled with a Japanese-speaking British friend to integrate deeper into local environments and enrich my understanding. Beyond initial observations, the theme of commodification emerged as a significant influence in blending traditional and modern fashion.
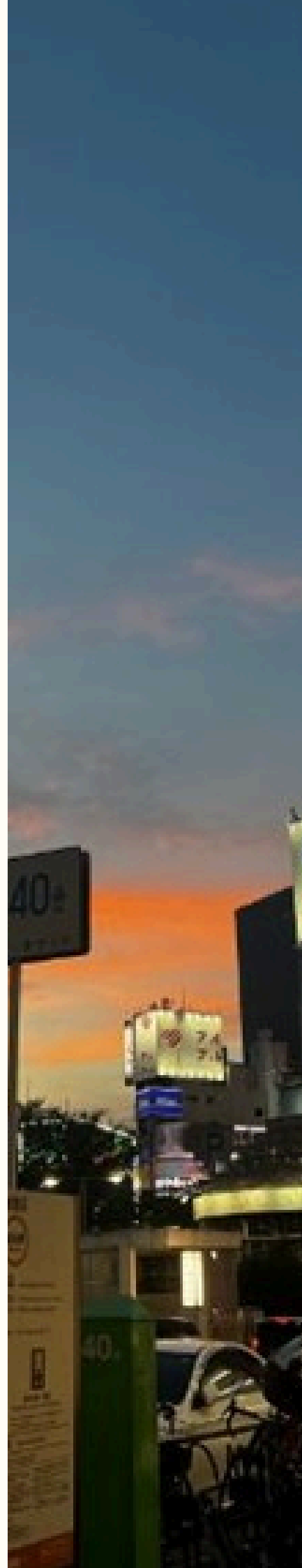
Becoming Islander

by Audrey Kwong

Over the summer of 2024, I spent two months on Kulangsu, a small island off Xiamen in Southern China. Once a proud international settlement after the Opium Wars, Kulangsu became known for its colonial architecture, Western influences, and prohibition of vehicles. Though it has since shifted from a residential haven to a domestic tourist hotspot, I visited to explore how identity evolves amid commercialisation and displacement. My fieldwork involved observations and informal interviews, drawing on my dual identity as both a tourist and a family member of islanders. I spoke with long-time residents, business owners, and content creators to understand what it means to be a "Kulangsu-lang."

Islanders often pointed to a deep connection with nature, knowing which herbs to pick or recalling childhoods spent swimming in the sea as markers of belonging. While some believed islander identity is rooted in family heritage and local networks, others saw it as a lifestyle that newcomers could adopt. The tension between "us islanders" and "them tourists" was palpable, especially as tourism brought noise, generic souvenirs, and a loss of local character. Yet some, like Lijue, a content creator, believed commercialisation could be positive if it reflected the island's culture and stories. From my observations, the island's nature remains a stable anchor for identity, even as its social landscape continues to shift.

Radical Reimaginations of Space

by Claudia Mckechnie

I conducted research over several months in 2024 in a thrift store x coffee shop in Observatory Cape Town, co-owned and managed by a collective of young South Africans from different parts of the city. My research involved understanding the ways in which spaces can be transformed in the post-apartheid context by the 'born free' generation to facilitate exchange and dialogue between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds and racial classifications, while also providing safe places for queer and/or racialised people to talk about difference while building solidarity. The members of the collective were actively engaged in their own communities, which were focused on reclaiming public space, building interracial queer solidarity networks, and for disenfranchised youth in Cape Town to be able to work and create on their own terms and make money from it.

This research revealed the indispensability of 3rd places for young people in the city, as well as the fragility of places that are community oriented rather than profit oriented. My interlocutors constant efforts to maintain the space spoke to the huge value and potential seen in 3rd spaces, as Cape Town remains a deeply segregated city, this place spoke to the idea that sustained community organisation can challenge norms that perpetuate inequalities in society, and it is key to be able to understand ones' reality in direct contact with members of different social stratifications in order to build respect and resilience against structural inequalities.

The Nexus of Belief and Restoration

by Emima Ebenezer

During my four-week ethnographic study in Telangana, I explored the fascinating world of Faith Church, a rapidly growing non-denominational community with over 100K attendees every Sunday. Known for its supernatural healings, the church attracts believers seeking physical restoration—testimonies of kidney regeneration, healing from HIV, and even recovery from paralysis are common. My research delved into how faith, prayer, and testimonies shape healing experiences, revealing a theology rooted in the power of personal belief.

Beyond healing, I also uncovered the complex journey of new converts in India, who face rejection, demonic attacks, and even persecution due to anti-conversion laws. Despite these hardships, many find a profound sense of liberation and a newfound community through the renewal of their faith. The transformative power of belief here is undeniable. The details of these observations are comprehensively explored in my full research report, The Nexus of Belief and Restoration: A Study of Spiritual Healings, Demonic Possession, Liminal Violence, and Religious Syncretism.

The Exoteric Power of the Esoteric

by Lyn Dombois

My research centres on the Baye Fall Sufi brotherhoods of Senegal. Specifically, it focuses on a rural commune-in-the-making dedicated to sustainable agriculture and self-sufficiency. Through immersive fieldwork - working in the peanut fields by day and engaging in long conversations around the evening fire - I explore the intersections of their material resistance, specifically the decommodification of labour in response to rapid capitalist development, and their esoteric practices of self-contemplation.

A key theme of this research is a twofold non-conformism. First, there is a shared frustration with the rapid disenchanting development of capitalism and a subsequent rejection of it, reflected by my interlocutor's emphasis on communal labour, agriculture, and anti-consumerist ethics. Secondly, however, this sits also in tension with the realities of the broader spiritual movement, as within the Mouride order, wealth and commerce are said to play too significant a role. The underpinning theme takes, my interlocutor's of mainstream Mouridism, to contrast with the simultaneous commercialisation of Sufism itself in a globalized economy of spiritual exchange.

Ultimately, the research challenges to move beyond traditional binaries of religious anthropology to understand the complex cosmologies that shape contemporary spiritual movements in relation to the material realities of our time, particularly their global dynamic.
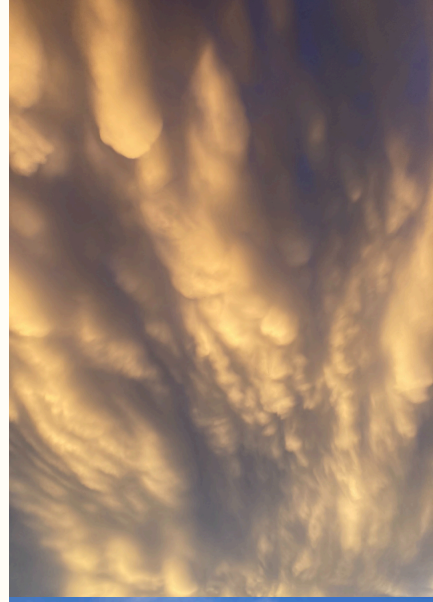
Silent Landscapes

by Pia Tasso

The cemetery is, by definition, a space imbued with a sense of finality and ending. Yet beneath its solemn stillness, it also emerges as a dynamic terrain where memory and history are both curated and contested. Over the course of the summer of 2024, I had the chance to conduct an ethnographic research project on the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris – the most visited graveyard in the world. Mostly shadowing tour guides of the cemetery, I witnessed how cemeteries may become urban mazes of meaning and symbolism, in which seemingly established binaries become blurred. Notably, I thread the popularly established dyadics which oppose recreation and remembrance, nature and culture, and fame and anonymity, whose respective boundaries become ambiguous within the necropolis.

I also drew from Foucault's concept of heterotopia to examine how the Père Lachaise may simultaneously uphold and subverts social norms – turning into a 'reservoir of imagination' – allowing for the cultivation of esoteric beliefs and practices. In an era of declining burial spaces and shifting mortuary practices, recognising those webs of significance may open the door to the reconceptualization of how cemeteries may be repurposed beyond mourning – becoming grounds of historical reappropriation and empowerment. By exploring these overlapping dimensions, I ultimately sought to reposition the cemetery as an active participant in contemporary urban life—constituting both a memorial to the past and a stage for the present.
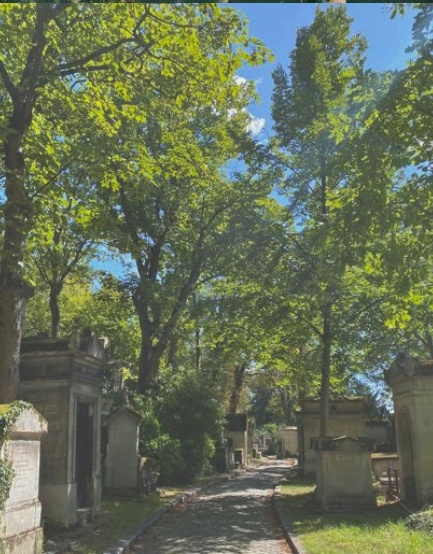
From Mauritius to London: Hierarchies of Belonging

by Soufyaan Timol

For a month, I was a regular customer to a Mauritian restaurant in London, studying the conversations and attitudes of first-generation Mauritian immigrants who had lived in London for 20 years or more, focussing on the views on immigration both in the UK and Mauritius. The restaurant serves as a meeting place where Mauritians gather to reminisce about the past, express concerns about the present, discuss the state of their homeland. Recurring themes were nostalgia for the past, in terms of safety, respect, and economic opportunities, concerns about the present, about things getting worse, frustration with the National Health Service (NHS) — many Mauritians had worked for the NHS — blaming immigrants for overburdening the system. I focussed on racial biases, the singling out of black immigrants as sources of crime, and, when talking of Mauritius, of Bangladeshi immigrants, for being the cause of the country's misfortunes.

These issues were brought up in certain conversations, with certain people, only when the participants were comfortable with few other listening in within this community of Mauritian immigrants. An interlocutor once said, pointing to himself and I, "with you" — a brown, middle class man, of similar background — "I can speak of these things." These patterns of exclusionary thinking, I theorise, construct a collective identity by defining these Mauritians against "the other." Being immigrants themselves, the fact of having 'inferiors' established them as a community.

Utopia Create by Game Character

by Tianqing Zhu

My summer ethnography project explored cosplay-commissioning which involves consumers hiring cosplayers to role-play as avatars from Otome games and has gained popularity in China. These interactions, often lasting a day, include activities like shopping or watching movies. On average, participants spend approximately 1,800 RMB, reflecting the dual nature of this practice as both a financial and emotional transaction.

My methodology combines participant and online observations with semi-structured interviews. As a participant observer, I play the role of photographer myself to capture their activities, and experienced the commissioning process firsthand when documented activities and reflections. I also engaged in online communities like WeChat and Xiaohongshu to understand how these platforms shape consumer expectations. Additionally, I interviewed consumers and cosplayers to explore their motivations, emotional experiences, and perceptions of intimacy and labour.

Cosplay-commissioning meets consumers' emotional needs in ways traditional relationships might not, particularly in the context of China's gendered societal expectations. Women use this practice to navigate cultural norms that often limit emotional expression. It challenges traditional gender roles by creating a predominantly female-oriented consumption activity. These communities empower women to redefine their social experiences, challenging societal norms and building bonds rooted in mutual understanding and shared passions.