

## CONFERENCE REPORT ON ‘THE MATERIALITY AND PERFORMANCE OF CHARMS’, SINGAPORE, 29<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST – 1<sup>ST</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2023

In a departure from previous practice, the 2023 conference of the Committee was held for in Asia. To be precise, it was held at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, organised by Katherine Hindley. The chosen themes were ‘materiality and performance’, which the conference organiser hoped might encourage papers exploring “how written charms are made and how spoken charms are performed”. The event was held in hybrid format, a continuation of practices developed during the recent pandemic, and this allowed those who could not make it to Singapore to speak and to listen. Roughly half of the speakers appeared online. There was a similar near fifty-fifty division observable in speaker-novelty: encouragingly, nine of the nineteen speakers were speaking at the series of charms conferences for the first time.

Following an unofficial social gathering on the Monday evening, the conference proper opened on August 29th with a session on ‘Theories of Healing in Europe and Asia’, which was followed by one on ‘The Performance of Charms’. On the Wednesday, there were sessions on ‘Charms and Christianity’, ‘Performance and Taboo’, and the first session on ‘Materials and Objects’. On Thursday, the final day of papers, there was the second session on ‘Materials and Objects’, before the closing session on ‘Charms in the 21st Century’.

There was a wide variety of interesting papers during these sessions. Speaking purely personally, four presentations linger particularly in my memory, so, albeit perhaps unfairly, I shall focus on them in this report. The first of these was Faizah Zakaria’s talk on ‘Healing the Lovesick in the Malay World’. Islamic healing books current in the Malay-speaking area, such as the *Kitab Tib* and the *Bustan As-Salatin*, would always have, alongside their descriptions of how to cure physical ailments, a

few remarks on how to deal with love sickness. Indeed, being thwarted in love was equated with being afflicted with a disease. The relevant charms here were to be read three times without taking a breath.

The second paper that caught my attention was delivered remotely by Daiva Vaitkevičiėne and was entitled 'Rites and Jokes: The Healing Practices of the Charmer Šimas Augulis'. The Augulis of the title, who died in 1934, was the focus for many traditional stories, and the speaker examined how well those stories might fit with what the ethnographic record tells us about charmers. The general answer was, Not very well. For instance, in the second half of the twentieth century, charmers were generally very religious, whereas Augulis did not go to church. There were also anecdotes about him which foregrounded his use of mockery and threats. For example, a twelve year-old boy who had never spoken was locked inside a house by Augulis. He also pretended to be very angry, and began sharpening a knife. The horrified child began to speak!

Another memorable remote presentation was that given by Ilona Tuomi: 'With these ingredients in one's pocket, one can do whatever!'. Drawing on the 9 files of folklore collected in Savo by the Finnish school-teacher, Otto Räsänen, the presentation focused on a local charmer nicknamed 'Vulpes'. Like other charmers, he used readily-available everyday objects in his practice, a bear's claw and a large nail stolen from the local church – what made these objects magical was their being charged with energy. Apparently many charmers and traditional healers in this area bore nicknames, such as 'Ruotsi', the smith. This raises the question as to whether charmer are more nicknameable than other categories of person in traditional societies. The final presentation I should like to recall here was delivered in person by Mordy Miller, and was titled 'The Materiality and Performance of Hebrew-written Charms from Israel against COVID-19'. It discussed a charm based on existing texts written by a Kabbalist and intended for widespread distribution in Israel against Covid.

One of the most notable aspects of the conference was the excursions. On the Tuesday morning, there was a visit to the Poh Teong Tian Temple, where we learnt about local divination practices. On the morning of the Thursday, there was a curator-led tour at the Asian Civilisations Museum. And on the Friday, following the close of the conference proper, there was an excursion that took in various urban temples, and which, following a pause for lunch at a hawkers' centre, concluded in a visit to the island of Ubin, where, amongst other attractions, numerous monkeys were spotted. And all in all, it can be said that the first

conference of the Charms, Charmers and Charming committee to be held in Asia was a success.

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