

A photograph of a man performing a Hindu ritual. He is shirtless and has several metal skewers with lemons and other objects piercing his chest and shoulders. He has a white diamond-shaped object on his forehead and a white arrow-like object on his shoulder. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

EXTREME RITUALS AS SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES

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On the island of Mauritius, thousands of Hindus gather together on the full moon of the Tamil month of Thai to take part in one of the most painful religious rituals in the world, the Thaipussam Kavadi, which involves piercing the body with needles, hooks and skewers, and other forms of suffering. Rituals like the kavadi are found in numerous contexts globally and pose an intriguing puzzle, as they involve obvious expenditures of effort, energy and resources without equally obvious payoffs. Anthropologists have long proposed that such costly behaviors persist because convey certain benefits to their practitioners and their communities. But how can we study these benefits? This talk will present an interdisciplinary research program that combined laboratory and field methods to explore puzzle of extreme rituals in real-life settings.

DIMITRIS XYGALATAS is an anthropologist and cognitive scientist at the University of Connecticut. His research interests include some of the things that make us human, including ritual, sports, music, cooperation, and the interaction between cognition and culture. His work on those topics involves an interdisciplinary approach that combines lab and field methods. He held positions at the universities of Princeton, Aarhus, and Masaryk, where he served as director of the Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion (LEVYNA). At UConn, he directs the Experimental Anthropology Lab, which develops interdisciplinary methods and technologies for studying behavior in real-life settings. He has conducted several years of fieldwork in Southern Europe and Mauritius. His research has been published in numerous journals across various fields, including anthropology, biology, psychology, religious studies, and general science. He is the author of the monograph *The Burning Saints*, and coeditor of the volume *Mental Culture: Classical Social Theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion*. He is the President of the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion.

MONDAY, May 20th, 3:30-5:00 PM , Building 50-51A

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