



## Invitation

Thursday, April 19th, 2012, 6 pm

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# The Historical Imagination and Imagining Madness: Henri Gaden and the French Colonial Experience in West Africa

### Lecture by Prof. Roy Dilley

This lecture examines the way in which imagination can play a role in anthropological methodology, particularly with respect to archival research; it also focuses on the idea of imagination as an object of analysis, specifically how a French colonial officer's experiences of West Africa and its peoples in the late 19th and early 20th centuries worked upon his imagination – and indeed, how his prior imaginings of the region and its people might also have informed his interactions with them.

Ethnography is often considered to be the transformation of life into text; but a historian or biographer has to turn texts into a life, a life that is now no longer an event, that is stripped of its immediate human experience and all its social relations. By drawing on Collingwood's method of the historical imagination, the paper suggests two potentially fruitful avenues of enquiry: how the imagination might be rendered for the anthropologist/historian as part of a methodology; how one might approach an investigation of the process of an imagination at work, in this case that of Henri Gaden over the course of his life's work in West Africa from the late 1890s to the 1930s. Gaden lived for 45 years in West Africa and served as a colonial officer in five territories (from Mali to Chad), and became the Governor of Mauritania at the end of his career (1920-1927). The shape that his imagination took and what its contents might have been are the focus of this lecture; and indeed, a problem of how to imagine and render colonial madness through a method of historical reconstruction is examined too. The work of J. Fabian is considered in this regard.

The lecture also reviews briefly some of the ways in which sociologists and anthropologists have conceived of imagination, and it considers how a genealogy of the concept might help situate our own contemporary views on the idea. It argues that the nature of the relationships between imagination, on the one hand, and its related cognate concepts (creativity, rationality etc), on the other, might form a pattern that is particular to our very own moment in history.

**Roy Dilley** is Professor of Social Anthropology and Dean of Arts at the University of St Andrews. His book publications include '*Islamic and caste knowledge practices among Haalpulaar'en in Senegal*' (Edinburgh 2004), '*The problem of context*' (Oxford 1999) and '*Contesting markets*' (Edinburgh 1992).

### Venue

Zentrum Moderner Orient  
Kirchweg 33  
Conference Hall

14129 Berlin

GEFÖRDERT VOM



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