

CNEAS Anthropology Seminar/ East Eurasian Studies Seminar

Date: 5-6pm, January 20, 2026

Venue: Room 430, Center for Northeast Asian Studies, Tohoku University; online via Zoom (Hybrid)

Turkmenistan: an auto-ethnography of a spectacular state

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- And for this sunny day, I wish to thank....
- The president!
- Mmmmh...ok, yes, the president!

Presidents come and go, symbols change but the essence of the Turkmen state, and nation, seems unchanging. Since my first visit to Turkmenistan in 2009, over the years, a lot has changed and as much as remained as it was. This presentation offers a first-hand account of Turkmenistan and its apparently unintelligible social dynamics through an involuntary auto-ethnography. When I first entered the country, I was not even considering the chance to come back, let alone write about the it. I considered myself a casual observer lucky enough to be there once. Against all odds, for almost 17 years, I was invited to a variety of events and get to involve local researchers in my own projects. By regularly meeting the same persons every year, a durable relationship developed. We mingled together and I was invited to join committees, visit ceremonies and work, side to side with my peers. I initially considered such episodes and experiences no more than anecdotal evidence, scattered and unscientific. However, when situation repeats, habits persists, attitudes are replicated throughout the years and behavioral patters remain similar and eventually predictable, a social scientists starts connecting the dots. This presentation is therefore both a reflection on self-ethnography and positionality in the “spectacular state” (Adams 2005), but also an occasion to share insights from a highly hermetic but fascinating environment that is, in many respect, unique (Polese and Horak 2015, Polese 2017).

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