

## **[The 2023 call for proposals for our AAR Seminar on "Collective Karma and Karmic Collectives: Conversations without Borders" is now open.](#)**

Discussion published by Jessica (Xiaomin) Zu on Sunday, February 5, 2023

[apologies for cross-listing]

Dear friends and colleagues,

We are excited to announce that the 2023 call for proposals for our AAR Seminar on "Collective Karma and Karmic Collectives: Conversations without Borders" is now open.

You can find our seminar CFP [here](#). All proposals must be submitted through [PAPERS](#). The deadline is **Wednesday, March 1, 2023, 5:00 PM Eastern Standard Time**. Detailed instructions are provided [here](#); please consult it carefully for information about procedures (and please note the limits on the number of appearances - one can only appear on the program two times in any capacity). For your convenience, we are also pasting the call below.

Best wishes,

Susanne Kerekes and Jessica Zu (co-chairs)

### **Year one- Encountering the ground: Indigenous frameworks and karma cluster concepts**

Karma, broadly understood as the idea that actions are world making, is deeply rooted in many religious communities, not just the Buddhist ones. For example, a 2021 PEW survey finds that, in India the majority -- Hindus 77%, Muslims 77%, Jains 75%, Buddhists 64%, Sikhs 62%, and Christians 52% -- believe in karma. Although similar surveys are yet to be conducted in Southeast Asian and East Asian religious communities, informal conversations with scholars in relevant traditions and a thorough review of secondary literature suggest a similar prevalence of karmic thinking and practices in these cultures. Despite the significance of karmic cluster concepts on the ground, scholars have yet to gain a decent understanding of how and why karma-related concepts function in the daily lives of these practitioners, outside the discourses presented in canonical texts. More problematically, Western individualism -- i.e., the longstanding, unexamined presumptions that the individual is the agent of action, the bearer of rights, locus of reason and affect -- has thus far pigeonholed scholarly understanding of karma within an individualistic framework.

To remedy this collective oversight and to uncover these marginalized worldviews that enact collective karma and actualize karmic collectives, our proposed Seminar offers an inviting space for scholars of all religions to investigate collectively a cluster of concepts -- i.e., karma and its related terms in diverse socio-historical contexts -- which we call "karma cluster concepts." There are two parameters that define the scope of our work. Firstly, the scope is delimited by its focus on karma cluster concepts. We investigate how these concepts interweave and organize societies, cultures, personal and social affect, moral reasoning and practices, oral and literary narratives, and

imaginings across a wide range of contexts. Secondly, the Seminar focuses on collectivity rather than individuality. We examine cases where karma cluster concepts are enacted and embodied as a collective affair.

In this inaugural year, we open the Seminar with an analysis on “karma cluster concepts” from indigenous frameworks. That is, rather than investigate karma only in silos (e.g., within a specific tradition, geographic region, or temporal specification), we approach karma through an investigation of “cluster concepts.” Here are some examples: interpersonal karma, intersubjective karma (including humans, animals, spirits), universal karma, karmic affinities, and karmic imaginings as a means to form and transform society.

Cluster concepts allow us to understand karma holistically, across traditional boundaries. In-depth examinations of the uses and functions of the constellation of karma-related concepts in the daily life of marginalized groups such as women, the elderly, the racialized other, and the outcaste, promises more than uncovering alternative visions of living together in peace. More importantly, as feminist scholars have long argued, these marginalized groups, because of their very marginality, holds epistemic vantage of how the unjust systems fail them and how to build up more equitable practices and institutions. In the age of climate crisis, their vantage points are crucial not only for our cherished principles of equality and justice but also for mustering political will to initiate meaningful collective actions so we can live otherwise.

This first Seminar welcomes scholars who wish to (1) share their expertise on such karma cluster concepts, and (2) generate working discussions to frame the various concepts presented. Some of the methodological questions we wish to address include but are not limited to: what is the distinction between karmic causes and karmic results? What are the philosophical foundations for agent- vs. event-causality? What are some better practices to avoid the secularist bias? How do scholars nurture long-term inter-religious dialogue and cross-disciplinary collaboration?

As a launching point for the presentations and discussions, we ask panelists to read a few secondary sources regarding karma as individual or collective, with emphasis on the latter (Walters 2003; Bokenkamp 2007; Bronkhorst, 2011; Appleton 2014; Brown 2020). Papers are limited to brief (8-10 minute) presentations that highlight specific examples of indigenous concepts of karma. During Q&A, the panelists and audience, collectively, brainstorm new approaches to uncover similar concepts and practices.

We seek diverse perspectives and welcome applicants working in various regions, religious traditions, disciplines, and time periods. We also encourage innovative proposals that allow specialists of different fields to present on shared or connected themes. We are especially interested in proposals from graduate students, contingent faculty, scholars of color, scholars of LGBTQ communities, scholars with disabilities, and scholars from other underrepresented groups.

### **Session Allotment: Tier 1**

- Two 90 minute sessions

### **Mission Statement:**

This Seminar investigates karma as shared or communal. Past scholarship has uncritically privileged an individualist approach to karma and has overlooked the centrality of sociokarma in non-canonical sources and lived experiences. Thus, we invite scholars to work together to uncover these marginalized voices “without borders” (across religious traditions, regions, disciplines, and methods). So, how do we bridge conversations without borders? Through a perspective that we call “karma-cluster concepts,” i.e., karma and its related terms in diverse socio-historical contexts.

We invite scholars who can contribute to a fuller picture of the following questions: (1) when, how, and why the debates about individual and collective karma arose in canonical sources and in scholarship; (2) how karma is interpreted in noncanonical texts such as minor commentaries, code of conducts, poetry, theatre, plays, and other forms of storytelling; (3) how collective karma is employed as tools of social engagement (e.g., eco-karma, racial karma, national karma); (4) how karma animates the spiritual practices of marginalized groups such as low-rank ascetic women, working-class lay followers including elderly women, gender and sexual minorities, and people with disabilities; (5) how karma weaves together a world where spirits, ancestors, animals, trees, rocks, rivers ... are agentive; (6) when, how, and why karma drops out of the moral repertoire of a group or a culture; and (7) assessing contemporary philosophical and tradition-based advancements of collective karma as responses to urgent issues.

Let's recover the widespread importance of karma-cluster concepts and diversify the mainstream narratives of karma.