

## ANTH 2320: Anthropology of Religion

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Office hours: Brooks 311, Th. 2:00-4:00 PM

Tu&Th 12:30-1:45 PM  
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*“Anthropology makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange”*



Serpent Mound in Ohio

### 1. Course Description:

This course investigates anthropological thought about religion, ritual, cosmology, and spirituality. We will put the modern, post-Enlightenment concept of “religion” itself into question by investigating diverse ceremonial and spiritual beliefs and practices worldwide. If religion, as a cultural concept, is usually defined in reference primarily to “world religions,” and against other cultural concepts such as “science” and “nature,” can the concept equally help us think about human diversity worldwide, including phenomena such as spirit possession, haunting, shamanism, animism, and civil religions? Do so-called religious experiences remain neatly contained within categorical confines (rational versus irrational, material versus immaterial, etc.), or can transformative, world-making moments challenge our conceptual foundations? Far from timeless expressions of bounded cultural essences, how are spiritual and religious phenomena shaped and transformed by people grappling with their historical contexts, particularly histories of violence such as economic exploitation, slavery, and colonialism? How do people negotiate globalizing worlds and fragmented spaces in which multiple worldviews, ways of being, and realities intersect and entangle?

### 2. Course Goals:

Religion and its associated concepts are culturally specific rather than natural categories, but they help us to talk about ineffable experiences (experiences too large or complex to put into words) that we often struggle to communicate and understand. In this course, students will investigate how social worlds are constructed through **discourse** and **ritualized practice**. We will deconstruct (tease apart hidden baggage in) religion as a cultural concept loaded with issues of **power, history, and meaning making**. At the same time, the religion concept directs our attention specifically to matters that appear **ineffable** or **otherwise**. As we treat these issues in a variety of social and cultural contexts across the globe, we will return to a number of themes and tensions throughout the semester, including:

- Knowledge, power, and history
- Cultural categories and the ineffable;
- Difference and otherness;
- Social memory;
- Global connection and local context;
- The body and personhood;
- Seen and unseen landscapes, cosmologies;
- Natures and ecologies;
- Materialities and immaterialities;
- and others.

By the end of the course, students should be better able to critically reflect on how meanings, ritualized practices, and realities are affected and transformed with an eye to power and history. Students will also be able to discuss important topics in the anthropology of religion, gain a broader awareness of human diversity, and analyze how anthropologists' own social contexts influence their thinking. Written assignments and in-class discussions will build skills in critical thinking and collaborative knowledge-building as students practice abstracting analytical frameworks from readings, evaluating supporting evidence, and applying those frameworks to novel situations in order to identify what they help reveal and what they obscure. The course will open up as many if not more questions than it resolves. Especially when no easy solutions are available, students will learn how to think anthropologically by listening carefully and compassionately to multiple perspectives and thinking through problems in ways sensitive to difference and global regimes of power.

### 3. Assigned Texts

- Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) and Upper One Games. 2014. *Never Alone (Kisima Innitchuna)*. E-Line Media.
  - a. Download: <http://neveraloneygame.com/>
- Nelson, Christopher. 2008. *Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance, and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- West, Harry G. 2007. *Ethnographic Sorcery*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Optional: Bielo, James S. 2015. *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

4. Grading:

Grades consist of discussion participation and three papers

Participation	30 points
Essay #1	20 points
Essay #2	20 points
Final exam	30 points

**A:** The student consistently makes creative contributions to discussion and moves the conversation forward in significant ways. Critically works through, applies, and synthesizes readings and course concepts. Draws connections between course materials. Engages with both the instructor *and* with fellow students.

**B:** The student consistently contributes to class discussion and demonstrates a solid understanding of the readings. Thinks through the readings, other students' comments, and one's own points well. Engages with both the instructor *and* with fellow students.

**C:** The student sometimes participates in class discussion. Understands the basic facts of the readings but perhaps not the big picture. Has consistent attendance.

**D:** The student only infrequently participates in class discussion or makes statements that are unrelated or do not advance the scholastic project of the course. Only has a partial understanding of the materials. Spotty attendance.

**F:** The student does not consistently come to class, does not participate in or disrupts class discussion, or misses the point of course materials.

5. Participation:

Classes will be largely discussion-based and student-driven, with lecture as needed to introduce important concepts. Additionally, students are required to complete two group ethnographic assignments and discuss their findings with the class (see handout).

During class discussions, we will review, interpret, extend, draw connections between, and critique the readings. This is a dialogical process that will build skillsets in communicating complex ideas, careful listening to others, and synthesizing or refracting

difference perspectives into more robust understandings. Rather than being given the answers, students will have to work through the materials. The goal is not to teach you to regurgitate information, but rather to provide the tools and practice needed to think more deeply.

Students are responsible for coming to class prepared to discuss the readings in terms of 1) the materials presented on a factual level, 2) the overarching argument, and 3) how the readings relate to each other and to course themes. The readings are **mandatory** and necessary in order to meaningfully participate and to do well on the essays and exams. Print out the readings and bring them to class so that we may discuss them more deeply. Prepare by writing down discussion questions or underline key passages you want to bring up before class meets. Readings marked as “secondary” are not required, but expand upon the topic of that class.

#### 6. Written Assignments

Students are required to complete two essays and a final exam. The purpose of these assignments is to reflect on and respond to course themes by building off of course readings. They are also a chance to develop your own take on the frameworks presented on the course and experiment with innovative and creative ideas. **Late work will not receive full credit.**

Essay #1 will be an ethnographic essay applying course concepts to a real-life situation (4-6 pages). Essay #2 will be an close analysis of course readings focusing on understanding peoples’ spiritual lives with attention to their historical and social context (4-6 pages).

All written assignments must be proofread. They must also include in-text citations in the (author date) format and a bibliography. If you are citing a specific passage or idea (as opposed to a general point of the reading), you must also include the page number. For example, “Later, Tissa would explain to me that Lipapa’s words euphemistically indicated that his father, Kalamatatu, thought of me as a sorcerer—a *fellow* sorcerer” (West 2007: 76, emphasis in original). Chicago Manuel of Style: [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)

#### 7. Absence Policy

Attendance is mandatory and will be taken each time the class meets. Students who miss more than three classes will lose points from their final grade.

#### 8. Email Policy

I will respond to reasonable email inquiries within a reasonable timeframe. I expect your emails to be courteous and professional: it is good etiquette to include a salutation and signature, to proofread, and to make the subject line relevant to the content. Although grammar and email etiquette standards are an unjust means of constraining access to resources and reproducing social hierarchies more than anything else, having these skills will make your professional life easier.

9. Computer Policy

Computers and phones are not to be used during class. Exceptions will be made if it becomes important to research something during class.

**List of Readings:**

**Week 1**

**SECTION I: Core Concepts**

**8/23 Introduction to Course**

- No readings

**8/25 What is Religion, Anyway?**

- Miner, Horace. 1956. "Body Ritual among the Narcirema." *American Anthropologist* 58(3): 503-507.
- Freed, Stanley A. and Ruth S. Freed. 2003[1990]. "Taraka's Ghost." In *Conformity and Conflict*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition, edited by James Spradley and David W. McCurdy, 341-347. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Leavitt, Stephen C. 2003[1997]. "Cargo Beliefs and Religious Experience." In *Conformity and Conflict*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition, edited by James Spradley and David W. McCurdy, 371-381. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Secondary: Bielo, Chapter 1: "What is 'Religion?'"

**Week 2**

**8/30 Worldview: Sense and Meaning Making**

- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 87-125. New York: Basic Books.
- Livingstone, David. 1858. "Dispute between a Rain Doctor and a Medical Doctor." In *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, 25-27. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Secondary: Bielo, Chapter 2: "Doing Religious Ethnography"

**9/2 Ritual: Sacredness, In-Betweenness, and Collective Joy**

- Turner, Victor W. 1967. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 93-111. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, Edie. 2012. "Introduction." In *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, 1-11. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Luhrmann, T. M. 2014. "Religion Without God." *New York Times*. December 24.

**Week 3**

*Add course deadline – September 6<sup>th</sup>*

*Drop course deadline – September 7<sup>th</sup>*

## 9/6 Symbols and Worlds

- *Never Alone (Kisima Innitchuna)*

## SECTION II: History Matters

## 9/8 Representation and Violence

- Brenner, Suzanne. 1996. "Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and 'the Veil.'" *American Ethnologist* 24(4): 673-697.
- King, Thomas. 2003. "You're Not the Indian I had in Mind." In *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, 31-60. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press.
  - Also available read out loud online:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daw7cGjrORE>
- Secondary: Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others." *American Anthropologist* 103(3): 783-790.

## Week 4 **\*\*\*Paper 1 due 9/15 in class**

### 9/13 Globalization and Market Economics

- Sahlins, Marshall. 1994. "Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of "the World System." In *Culture/Power/History*, edited by Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, 412-455. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Secondary: Bielo, Chapter 5: "Who Do You Trust?"
- Ethnographic Assignment: Groups 1, 2

### 9/15 Ritualization and Syncretism

- In class: *Trobriand Cricket*
- Secondary: Bielo, Chapter 6, "Going Global"

## Week 5

### 9/20 Slavery and Memory

- Shaw, Rosalind. 2002. "Spirit Memoryscape" and "The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production." In *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, 46-69, 201-224. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ethnographic Assignment: Groups 4, 5

### 9/22 Slavery and Memory, Cont.

- Holsey, Bayo. 2008. "Navigating New Histories." In *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*, 196-232. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ethnographic Assignment: Groups 5, 6

## Week 6

### 9/27 Neoliberalism and Inequality

- Wray, Matt. 1997. "White Trash Religion." In *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, edited by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, 193-210. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sanders, Todd. 2001. "Save our Skins: Structural Adjustment, Morality, and the Occult in Tanzania." In *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft, and Africa*, edited by Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders, 160-183. London: Routledge.

## SECTION II: Bodies and Affect

### 9/29 *Dancing with the Dead*

- Nelson, introduction and chapter 1
- Secondary: Bielo, Chapter 3: "Bodies, Words, and Things."

### Week 7

**10/4 NO CLASS - READING DAY**

### 10/6 *Dancing with the Dead*

- Nelson, chapter 2 and 3
- Ethnographic Assignment: Groups 7, 8

### Week 8

### 10/11 *Dancing with the Dead*

- Nelson, chapter 4
- Ethnographic Assignment: Groups 9, 10

### 10/13 *Dancing with the Dead*

- Nelson, chapters 5 and conclusion

### Week 9

### 10/18 Death and Mourning

- Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage." In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. 1-21. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Echols, Damien and T. K. Nakagaki. 2016. "What Karma Means When You Spend Nearly 20 Years on Death Row." *Tricycle*. <http://tricycle.org/trikedaily/what-karma-means-when-you-spend-nearly-20-years-on-death-row/>
- Ethnographic Assignment: Groups 11, 12

### 10/20 Death and Mourning, Cont.

- Stonington, Scott. 2011. "Facing Death, Gazing Inward: End-of-Life and the Transformation of Clinical Subjectivity in Thailand." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 35: 113-133.

- Sterenson, Lisa. 2000. "The Suicidal Wound and Fieldwork among Canadian Inuit." In *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*, edited by John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi, 55-76. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

### SECTION III: Landscapes and Ecologies

#### Week 10 **\*\*\*Paper 2 due 10/25 in class**

##### 10/25 Landscape and Memory

- In class: *Land of Songs*

##### 10/27 Pilgrimage

- Morgensen, Scott Lauria. 2009. "Back and Forth to the Land: Negotiating Rural and Urban Sexuality Among the Radical Faeries." In *Out in Public: Reinventing Lesbian/Gay Anthropology in a Globalizing World*, edited by Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap, 143-163. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rowan, Yorke. 2004. "Repackaging the Pilgrimage: Visiting the Holy Land in Orlando." In *Marketing Heritage: Archaeology and the Consumption of the Past*, edited by Yorke Rowan and Uzi Baram, 249-266. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

#### Week 11

##### 11/1 Placenames and Oral Histories

- Basso, Keith H. 1996. "Stalking with Stories." In *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, 37-70. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. 1997. "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories." In *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, 25-47. New York: Simon & Schuster.

##### 11/3 Landscape and Memory, Cont.

- Hantman, Jeffrey L. 2013. "Sites in History, History in Sites: Archaeology, Historical Anthropology and Indigenous Knowledge." In *The Death of Prehistory*, edited by Peter R. Schmidt and Stephen A. Mrozowski, 201-220. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mojica, Monique. 2012. "In Plain Sight: Inscripted Earth and Invisible Realities." *New Canadian Realisms* 2: 218-242.

#### Week 12

##### 11/8 Traditional Ecological Knowledge TEK

- Turner, Nancy, Marianne Boelscher Ignace, and Ronald Ignace. 2000. "Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Wisdom of Aboriginal Peoples in British Columbia." *Ecological Applications* 10(5): 1275-1287.
- Lansing, J. Stephen on Balinese Water Temples.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9ozS8BKUFI>



### **11/10 TEK and Animism**

- Cruikshank, Julie. 2012. "Are Glaciers 'Good to Think With'? Recognizing Indigenous Environmental Knowledge." *Anthropological Forum* 22(3): 239-250.
- Willerslev, Rane. 2012. "Laughing at the Spirits in North Siberia: Is Animism Being Taken too Seriously?" *E-Flux Journal* 36(7): 13-22.
  - Available online: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/laughing-at-the-spirits-in-north-siberia-is-animism-being-taken-too-seriously/>

### **Week 13**

#### **11/15 Ecology, Dance, and Climate Change**

- For Background: Donna Haraway on Human Exceptionalism: <https://vimeo.com/15787486>
- For Background: Anna Tsing on nature as a sociopolitical construct: <https://vimeo.com/16212291>
- Ikuta, Hiroko. 2011. "Embodied Knowledge, Relations with the Environment, and Political Negotiation: St. Lawrence Island Yupik and Iñupiaq Dance in Alaska." *Arctic Anthropology* 48(1): 54-65.

#### **11/17 Science and Politics after Postcolonialism and the New Materialisms**

- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. "Preface" and "The Sacred and the Superfund." In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, ix-x, 310-340. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

### **Week 14**

#### **11/22 Materiality and Immateriality**

- Karlström, Anna. 2002. "Spiritual Materiality: Heritage Preservation in a Buddhist World?" *Journal of Social Archaeology* 5:338-355.
- Secondary: Babrec de Mori, Bernd. 2015. "Sonic Substances and Silent Sounds: An Auditory Anthropology of Ritual Songs." *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 13(2): 25-43
- In class: *Ghost Hound*

November 24<sup>th</sup>

NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK

### **SECTION IV: Making Sense of Things so Far?**

### **Week 15**

#### **11/28**

- **Ethnographic Sorcery**
  - West, pp. 1-48

#### **12/2**

- **Ethnographic Sorcery**
  - West, pp. 49-end

## **Week 16**

### **12/6 Reflections on the Course**

- Toelken, Barre. 1996. "From Entertainment to Realization in Navajo Fieldwork." In *The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*, edited by Bruce Jackson and Edward D. Ives, 1-17. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Ortiz. 1999. "Men on the Moon." In *Men on the Moon: Collected Short Stories by Simon Ortiz*, 3-14. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

### **TAKE HOME EXAM: Due in my mailbox on Tuesday, 12/13, at 5:00 PM**

\*\*\*If you want comments back on your exam, leave a self-addressed and stamped envelope with me when you drop off your exam. I will mail it to you.