Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, Culture and Society

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Type of Class Arrangement:
Three days a week, 14:30-18:00

Course Description and Objectives:
This course is for those who are interested in the anthropological approaches and methods of studying religious and cultural practices in both western and non-western societies.

The course will enable students to gain access to the history of anthropology and learn from various theoretical ideas that examine religion, culture and society. They will also be informed of key debates in anthropology and be encouraged to critically examine issues found in the following key topics; ritual, symbolism, purity and pollution, gender, body, spirit possession, healing, death, and religious practices in the Diaspora, by way of attending lectures, reading monographs, discussing ethnographic films, and examining empirical case studies. The students are expected to conduct short fieldwork on one of the topics discussed in the lectures.

Topic for Each Session:
1. Introduction: Anthropological Approaches and Methods
2. Ritual
3. Symbolic Meanings
4. Purity and Pollution
5. Body and Spirituality
6. Gender and Sex
7. Ancestor worship
8. Spirit Cults
9. The Diaspora

Teaching Methods:
Lecture and seminar discussion

Recommended Readings:
Assessment: One 2,000 words essay on one of the topics has to be submitted by the deadline, which constitute 50 percent of the total course work. Exams marks will constitute the other 50 percent.

1. Introduction: Anthropological Approaches and Methods
The lecture attempts to locate anthropological debates on religion, culture and society in the history of Western intellectual thought and provide comparative cross-cultural perspectives in understanding the ‘other’ mainly in non-Western societies. The anthropological methods of conducting fieldwork are also introduced to help students understand religious and cultural practices and meanings in their respective contexts. The lecture familiarises them with the development of ‘participant observation’; a method widely used in ethnographic fieldwork.

Reading:

2. The Study of Ritual
This lecture surveys some of the major developments that have taken place in ritual studies since the works of Van Gennep and Turner. Some rituals are intended to maintain social stability whilst others undermine or subvert the authority of social order. There are rituals performed to control aspects of natural environment and others that are simply about performance.

Reading:
3. Symbolic Meanings
Natural symbols play prominent roles in cultural and religious symbolism throughout the world. This lecture examines how bodily symbols are used as universal metaphor to construct order and express ways in which people communicate with one another.

**Reading:**

4. Purity and Pollution
The lecture examines the agents, activities, periods, substances, and contexts that are known to pollute, whilst others purify. It also considers why ‘pollution’ challenges the social order and how taboos are used to demarcate and define social and religious boundaries.

**Reading:**

5. Body and Spirituality
The human body has served as a vehicle in the quest for higher spirituality through the use of various techniques ranging from extreme physical austerities to mental visualisations, providing a metaphor on topics such as that of the cosmos, divinity, and the nature of sacred. This lecture attempts to understand some of the ways in which physicality and spirituality becomes intertwined and constructed through the mediation of the social body.

**Reading**


**6. Gender and Sex**

The lecture offers an anthropological perspective to the issue of gender and examine gender roles and practices in non-European societies. It examines how gender is re-constructed in initiation rituals and introduces debates regarding cultural representations of gender, and explores whether or not universal patterns can be discerned.

**Reading:**


Rashid, S. F. 2000. ‘Female adolescents and their sexuality: notions of honour, shame, purity and pollution during the floods.’ *Disasters* 24, 1: 54-70.


**7. & 8. Ancestor Worship and Spirit Cults**

Shamanism and spirit possession comprise a complex and exciting subject for anthropological study. Different forms and variations of spirit possession are examined from case studies in Asia and Africa in an attempt to understand how people negotiate or appropriate external powers in their episodes of illness, dissociation, dreams, and therapy. It also questions the many definitions in order to understand the phenomena and examines the rationalist approaches to spirit possession that attempt to interpret such practices from pathological and psychological standpoints.

**Reading:**


9. The Diaspora

The study of Diaspora has attracted a huge interest in the last 20 years and it is said that ‘Diaspora’ has become ‘one of the buzzwords of the post modern age’. Interestingly, ‘religion’ in its transnational diasporic context received relatively little attention in this growing field until perhaps 9.11. The lecture provides an overview of the study of Diaspora and examines the dynamics of religious transformation in the areas of identity, practice, and the various approaches that refer to ‘hybridity’.

**Reading:**