

# Magic, Myth, and the Supernatural

ANTH 2340/ UGEC 2960

Term 1 2025-26

Lecture: Monday 10:30am-12:15pm, NAH 114

Tutorials:

T1: Monday 12:30-1:15pm, UCA\_105

T2: Monday 1:30-2:15, UCA\_105

T3: Monday 2:30-3:15, UCC\_207

Instructor: Prof. Leilah VEVAINA (NAH 303, [leilah.vevaina@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:leilah.vevaina@cuhk.edu.hk))

Office hour: by appointment

TA:

## **Brief Course Description:**

All societies have some belief in another world, yet beliefs vary widely between societies. This course will examine phenomena often viewed as irrational and superstitious to see how they can be understood in cultural terms. The course will not just examine the truth-value of many beliefs (are there vampires and ghosts?) but will focus on understanding why humans hold different kinds of beliefs and how they make sense within their cultures and societies. We will examine the role that religion plays in the human experiences of uncertainty, risk, and death.

The course will examine traditional anthropological topics such as magic, myths, divination, witchcraft, and ghosts, as well as popular culture representations of vampires, zombies, and other monsters. Examples from contemporary industrial societies, will be used to challenge notions of “modern (or Western) rationality” versus “traditional superstition.” The course will end by discussing how anthropology deals with the concept of religion and how religious identities are shaped in the contemporary world.

For UGE students, it can also serve as an introduction to anthropology.

## **Learning Outcomes:**

Upon the completion of this course, student will:

1. learn to see the cultural nature of reality and of the supernatural;
2. understand how and why many seemingly irrational and bizarre beliefs make sense in their cultural contexts;
3. learn how to use critical thinking while being tolerant of other views;
4. develop a healthy skepticism, while at the same time remaining open to new ideas.
5. Assess and analyze the relationship between religious beliefs and practices and their social, economic, and political contexts.

### Required Texts:

All the required readings (as shown in the “reading list” on this syllabus) will be posted on the Blackboard course site.

The course does not have a textbook. But quite a few chapters are selected from this popular reader and its later version:

Moro, Pamela A. and James E. Myers, 2010 *Magic Witchcraft and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion 8th edition*, New York: McGraw-Hill—This book will be placed on reserve.

### UG Evaluation:

Grade Item	Percentage	Due Date
Course Attendance and Tutorial Participation	15%	Throughout term
Group Fieldwork Proposal	5%	October 10
Ethnographic Report	30%	November 7
Group Oral Presentation	15%	Last two lecture sessions
Final Exam	35%	December 9

#### 1. Participation (15%)

This component is based on your preparation for and contribution to lecture and tutorial discussion. Active participation (consistently asking questions, offering comments), not just attendance, is required for an A grade in participation.

#### 2. Group Fieldwork Site Proposal (5%):

You will form a group or be assigned to a group. For this part of your Group Project, your group has to pick a site in Hong Kong following the themes of the course and provide: 1) background, 2) You should reference (1-3) scholars, who have written about your topic. You can use the course readings if they directly relate to your project. 3) Why you picked that site for your fieldwork. 4) Your plan of research. This proposal should be in English, 12-point font, Times New Roman, 800-1000 words. Due on **October 10 by 11:59pm**, email to TA, at address above. \*On a case by case basis the instructor will approve an individual research proposal and paper if a student is not able to do the group project.

#### 3. Ethnographic Report/Rapporteur Notes from Workshop

Each student will write up a short report of fieldnotes and how they relate to course readings and course materials. Please follow the Department Style Guide (the guideline can be found in this following link: <https://www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/~ant/links/departement-thesis-style/>). **Due November 7 by 11:59pm.**

#### 4. Group Presentation (20%):

Students are going to form groups, conduct research on a chosen topic, and present their findings as a group at the end of the course. The presentations will be graded the use of slides, the presenting and analysis of materials, and the overall coherence. The exact length of the presentation and the size of the group will be determined later according to the number of students enrolled. \*On a case by case basis the instructor will approve an individual research paper if a student is not able to complete the group assignment.

#### 5. Final Exam (35%):

This will be conducted in the format of short answers in response to the questions based on readings and your ethnographic project. Exam answers are to be double-spaced, typed in 12-point font, Times New Roman, and submitted via Veriguide and then submitted to Blackboard with the signed Veriguide certificate. Please follow the Department Style Guide. Due **December 9** by 11:59pm.

#### **Course Policies:**

##### **Reading:**

Reading is an important part of the learning experience. Students come to this course with different backgrounds, so some of you may find this amount of reading challenging—those from anthropology or humanities/social sciences backgrounds may find it “normal” though. Please finish the readings at least before the tutorial. Take notes while you read, and bring your questions and thoughts to the tutorial to discuss with fellow students.

##### **Course attendance and participation:**

You should attend lectures regularly. Tutorial attendance is mandatory. If you have an unavoidable conflict or become too sick to attend the tutorial, you must contact the tutorial instructor before the tutorial begins. Active participation in tutorials is necessary and your contribution to discussion will not only be highly appreciated but also become the basis of evaluation.

##### **Academic Integrity:**

The use of **predictive/generative AI (ChatGPT and others) is strictly prohibited** for the assignments in this course and **will be considered plagiarism.**

Students need to know how to cite properly and how to avoid plagiarism—using someone else’s ideas or words without attribution. Please read the University’s guidelines about academic honesty ([www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/index.htm](http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/index.htm)). It’s worth refreshing your memory even if you have read it before. Pay particular attention to Section 1 (What is plagiarism), Section 2 (Proper use of source material), and Appendix 1 (Details guidelines on proper use of source material).

##### **Late Policy:**

For the midterm and final exam, extension is only granted to documented medical or family/personal emergencies. You must contact the instructor and the TA as soon as possible if such unfortunate events occur. Each day late without an approved extension will result in a reduction of 1/3 of a letter grade (i.e. A becomes A-; B+ becomes B).

## Course Readings

[Sept 1 is Congregation, no class]

### Week 1 – September 8

Introduction to the Course in Lecture and tutorials

Chua, Liana, 2017, "What Religious Beliefs Reveal about Post-Truth Politics." *Sapiens*,  
<https://www.sapiens.org/culture/post-truth-politics/>

### Week 2 – September 15 – Magic

Gmelch, George 1971 "Baseball Magic." In Moro and Myers, *Magic Witchcraft and Religion* 8<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 320-327.

### Week 3 – September 22 – Religion and Anthropology

Moro, Pamela, 2010, "Thai Buddhism and the Popularity of Amulets in Anthropological Perspective" in Moro and James eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion* 8<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 34-41

Geertz, Clifford, 1972, "Religion" In Moro and Myers, *Magic Witchcraft and Religion* 8<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 6-15.

### Week 4 – September 29 – Myths

Narayan, Kirin, 1997, "Across the Seven Seas: a Hindu Woman's Sacred Narratives" In Moro, Pamela, and Myers eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion* 9<sup>th</sup> edition, 55-63.

Beattie, John, 1960, "Nyoro Myth" In Moro and Myers, *Magic Witchcraft and Religion* 8<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 58-62.

Campbell, Joseph, 1988 first half of Chapter 5 "The Hero's Adventure" in *The Power of Myth* (with Bill Moyers) pp. 123-140 in large-format version. [This chapter, from a popular book and video (also available at the UC video library) discusses the hero in myth.]

### Week 5 – October 6 – Ritual

Mason, Michael Atwood, 2002, "I bow my head to the ground" In Moro and Myers, *Magic Witchcraft and Religion* 8<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 97-107.

Kapchan, Deborah, 1996, "Moroccan Women's Body Signs: Henna and Tattoo", In Moro, Pamela, and Myers eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion* 9<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 129-139.

Manoharan, Christopher and Xygalatas, Dimitris, 2019, "How Hearts Align in a Muslim Ritual",

## **Group Fieldwork Proposal Due October 10**

### **Week 6 – October 13 – Film Viewing in Lecture**

Bernstein, Anya, 2006 *In Pursuit of the Siberian Shaman* Documentary (watch selections in lecture) Film will be discussed in tutorial this week.

### **Week 7 – October 20 - - Shamanism**

Turner, Victor, 1972, "Religious Specialists", In Moro, Pamela, and Myers eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion 9<sup>th</sup> edition*, pp. 143-150.

Vitebsky, Piers, 2000, "Shamanism", In Moro and Myers, *Magic Witchcraft and Religion 8<sup>th</sup> edition*, pp. 150-158.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1976, "Training for the Priesthood Among the Kogi of Colombia", In Moro, Pamela, and Myers eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion 9<sup>th</sup> edition*, pp.164-178.

### **Week 8 – October 27 –Ghosts and Possession**

Bosco, Joseph, 2003. "The Supernatural in Hong Kong young people's ghost stories," *Anthropological Forum*, 13:2, 141-149.

Freed, S.A. and Freed, R.S., 1999. "Taraka's Ghost", *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*. Eds James Spradley and David McCurdy. Pp. 260-265.

OPTIONAL: Kipnis, Andrew, 2021, *The Funeral of Mr. Wang: Life, Death, and Ghosts in Urbanizing China*. Selections.

## **October 31-Nov 1 – Deathcare Workers Workshop**

### **Week 9 – November 3 Vampires and Monsters**

Leacock, Joseph, 2018, "Vampirism: Modern Vampires and Embattled Identity Claims", In *The Supernatural in Society, Culture, and History* (2018), edited by Dennis Waskul and Marc Eaton. First Edition.

Luckhurst, Roger, 2015, Introduction, from *Zombies: A Cultural History*, Reaktion Books.\*\* Chap 1 is optional reading

## **Ethnographic Report/Rapporteur Notes Due November 7**

### **Week 10 – November 10 Witchcraft and Divination**

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1963, "Consulting the Poison Oracle Among the Azande", in Moro and James eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion 8th edition*, pp. 308-313.

Luhmann, Tanya 1989 "The Goat and the Gazelle: Witchcraft," in Moro and James eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion 8th edition*, pp. 299-307.

### **Week 11 – November 17 – Religious Identities**

Lewis, William F., 1993, "Urban Rastas in Kingston, Jamaica", in Moro and James eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion 8th edition*, pp.376-380.

Hoodfar, Homa, 2001, "The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads", in Moro and James eds., *Magic Witchcraft and Religion 8th edition*, pp.412-427.

### **Week 12 – November 24 – Group Presentations I**

Gusterson, Hugh, 2020, "Covid-19 and the Turn to Magical Thinking", *Sapiens*,  
<https://www.sapiens.org/culture/covid-19-magic/>

### **Week 13 – \*\*\* December 1 Makeup DAY– Group Presentations II** **No tutorial**

**Final Exam December 9**

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Criteria for 1) the course and 2) for coursework</i>
A (> 95%)	<p>1) Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work has <b>creatively</b> synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original and sophisticated way. The argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims.</p>
A- (90-94%)	<p>1) Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.</p>
<p>B-range</p> <p>B+ = 87-89%</p> <p>B = 84-86%</p> <p>B- = 80-83%</p>	<p>1) Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.</p> <p>2) The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence.</p>
<p>C-range</p> <p>C+ = 77-79%</p> <p>C = 74-76%</p> <p>C- = 70-73%</p>	<p>1) Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.</p> <p>2) The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged or engaged vaguely. The argument and the writing is not clear, and/or there is no evidence for statements and claims made. <b>Citations</b> are not consistent or are absent.</p>
D-range	<p>1) Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing. Citations are not consistent or are absent.</p> <p>3) <b>Evidence of generative AI use</b> (see note on plagiarism)</p>
F	<p>1) Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.</p> <p>2) The work has failed respond to the assignment prompt.</p> <p>3) Evidence of plagiarism</p>

