Module Syllabus

1. Introduction

Outline / What is our topic?

This module explores ethnographic literature and theory on familiar topics in the anthropology of religion. It highlights the importance of ethnographic research and the relevance of case studies. Students will become familiar with the main anthropological interpretations of symbolism, rites of passage such as initiations and death rituals, and the different ways that people relate to ancestors, spirits, gods and ghosts. The module encourages students to think in cross-cultural terms about such diverse topics as the links between childhood and the spirit world, shamanism and spirit possession, and pilgrimage and world renunciation. Questions such as how persons are made through religious experience, why certain objects are revered, and why persons take long arduous journeys to reach the sacred literally and metaphorically are explored.
Educational Aims
The course aims to explore ethnographic literature and theory on familiar topics in the anthropology of religion. It highlights the importance of ethnographic research in the anthropology of religion and the relevance of case studies.

It is expected that students become familiar with main anthropological interpretations of the topics discussed. It is also expected that students are able to critically assess and evaluate the literature consulted. In both examination and essays, students should demonstrate an ability to write clearly and consult a wide range of anthropological texts, their main focus should be on ethnographies relating to the topics.

Learning Outcomes
Generic skills:
• Develop knowledge of theoretical and ethnographic approaches to the study of religious experiences.
• Evaluate the merits of specific concepts and their application in different cultural settings.
• Engage competently with ethnography as a genre of anthropological writing.

Module-specific skills:
• Recognise distinctive anthropological argument religious experience.
• Develop an ability to compare and contrast different religious traditions.

Lectures, seminars and participation / How can I get involved?
The module is comprised of ten lectures, each of will cover a good deal of ground, so it’s essential that you attend them routinely. Take good notes and freely ask your questions, since interactive learning is the *best way* to master the concepts and ways of thinking that is signature to anthropology.

Apart from materials that will enable you to take notes, please bring this module syllabus to every lecture. You may wish to refer to books/articles during a lecture and to consult the reading lists there and then. It’s also important that you bring the texts that you have read actively and annotated to clarify their structure and to add your questions and observations.

KEATS & Maughan Library / Where do I find relevant sources?
Relevant sources should be available on KEATS (especially for the assigned seminar readings). You’ll also find sources in the Maughan Library. Please follow this link to the library’s excellent “Subject Resources” page for TRS:
http://libguides.kcl.ac.uk/trs

Please contact the module tutor in the first instance – and the Maughan Library in the second instance – if you think that relevant sources are missing.

2. Module plan & Readings

Recommended introductions, source collections, and general works
Please emulate one of the reference styles adopted in the Department (MHRA or Harvard) for all bibliographical entries!
WEEK 1. Ritual and the Life Course
This session examines anthropological approaches to how ritual is used to mark the life course. Not only do rituals instil certain qualities and capacities in people; they also help to refashion the person through time. Rites of passage in particular take a huge variety of forms, including initiations, bar mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Drawing upon classical and contemporary anthropological theories of ritual, we ask: Do rituals merely ‘mark’ social and biological changes or are a means of ‘creating’ social and religious life?


Lewis, Gilbert. 1980. Day of Shining Red (Chapter 3 on ‘views from one village’). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Tutorial session review and discussion:

WEEK 2. Ancestors, Ghosts, Spirits, and Gods
The human life course is intimately tied up with the spirit world, both within and beyond the ritual context. In this session, we analyse some ways in which anthropologists have drawn distinctions between the different kinds of spirit beings – including ancestors, ghosts, spirits and gods – who populate the universes of the peoples they study. We explore questions
such as: Why would one person’s ancestor be another person’s ghost? What does it mean to live in a world where the gods comprise a ‘spirit bureaucracy’? How does the spirit world (and its politics) mirror the human world (and its politics)?


**Tutorial session review and discussion:**


**WEEK 3. The Making of Persons**

In this session, we consider what part religious thought and practice has in the making of persons beyond the ritual context. Much of our everyday lives are ‘shot through’ with religious significance – from relations of hospitality and commensality to the making of kin, from hunting and harvesting resources to protecting the wider environment, from the bestowing of names to cycles of life and death. How does ritual and religion permeate our everyday lives and what kind of persons does it make us?


WEEK 4. Childhood, Learning, Youth and the Spirit World

The anthropology of childhood and learning has emphasized that children are ‘born into’ social relationships with their kin, neighbours, friends, ancestors, and even the spirit world. Every person, then, is placed from birth into a network of important connections that link everyday experiences up to religious practices. Yet childhood is often also considered a vulnerable time in life. The child, who is not yet a full person, is especially susceptible to soul loss, spirit attacks, and even being used as the ‘vehicle’ for harming others with sorcery. In this session, we consider how children are integrated into – or sometimes shunned from – the world of humans, ancestors and spirits.


WEEK 5. Shamanism and Spirit Possession

In this session, we look at the prominent role of spirit possession and healing in anthropology. Perhaps one of the most dangerous boundaries that people may cross is that between the world of humans and the world of spirits. Yet religious practitioners in numerous traditions – and among shamanic groups in particular – manage this on a regular basis. How does spirit possession shed light on the nature of ‘being human’ in any given society? Does spirit possession really entail ‘states of ecstasy’ or ‘trance’? Where does the
shaman’s mind ‘go’ during spirit possession? We explore diverse approaches to spirit possession, starting with the classic literature on Siberia and moving on to ethnographic cases further afield.


Tutorial session review and discussion:

WEEK 6. ‘Being Caught’ in Witchcraft
Anthropology is renowned for studying witchcraft – including its accounts of the anthropologist’s own experience of ‘being caught’ within it. In today’s session, we look at the dynamics of witchcraft initiations, explanations, and contestations of responsibility from inside of the witchcraft episode. How does the 'logic' of witchcraft become clearer – eliding simpler arguments on 'rationality' – when anthropologists explore it from the inside? What happens when the anthropologist is unwittingly ‘caught’ within the witchcraft episode?


**Tutorial session review and discussion:**


**WEEK 7. Postcolonialism in Religious Experience**

We shift our focus in this session to the impact of colonialism and postcolonialism on religious experience. No part of the world has remained ‘untouched’ by colonialism and its aftermath, which has dramatically increased the connections between people across the globe, while also drafting them into the ‘neoliberal’ economy. How do people draw upon their religious experiences to manage the throes of postcolonialism today? Is ‘resistance’ even possible or of any value in our globalised world? From witchcraft trials to imposter spirits – from the state’s cooption of minority religious dynasties to grassroots ‘holy men’ movements against the state – this session explores how religion offers powerful leverage in the face of postcolonial change.


Fisiy, Cyprian and Geschiere, Peter. 1990. ‘Judges and witches, or how is the state to deal with witchcraft?’ in *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*. 118:135-156.

WEEK 8. Pilgrimage and World Renouncers
In this session, we look at how people break from everyday routines by going on pilgrimage or, occasionally, by embarking on a totally new life-course as ascetic ‘world renouncers’. Not all forms of pilgrimage entail world renunciation. Pilgrimage is often undertaken as a temporary ‘interlude’ within the life-course, to fulfil a religious duty within a given tradition (as in the hajj to Mecca). Yet pilgrimage may alternatively entail life-long wandering, as a means of renouncing the worldly life. How are pilgrimage and world renunciation constituted as ‘extraordinary’ religious experiences and how do they afford a means for ‘breaking’ away from the world?


Tutorial session review and discussion:

WEEK 9. Memory and Commemoration
This session analyses the role of memory and commemoration in religious experience. The anthropology of memory is a broad field, encompassing everything from national rites of celebration to household-based rituals that recall a violent past. We examine this broad sweep of difference between the public and private spheres of memory and
commemoration, asking how people harness religious experiences to enliven certain memories while burying others.


Tutorial session review and discussion:

WEEK 10. The Anthropologist’s Return: From Memory to Innovation
This final session explores how the anthropologist’s return visits to the field provide the focal point for eliciting memories of rapidly ‘fading’ religious traditions and innovative religious experiences alike. Religion never exists in a vacuum and anthropological fieldwork certainly influences the religious lives of the peoples we study. Long-term fieldwork in particular enables anthropologists and their fieldwork friends to bring memories of bygone religious practices into dialogue with their contemporary variants – possibly encouraging new innovations in religious practice. We ask in this lecture how anthropology can be mobilise new forms of religious experience in unanticipated ways.


**Tutorial session review and discussion:**

**Revision Class: Wednesday 4 May 2016, 12.00-13.00, Strand S0.12**

**3. Assessment / How will my work be assessed?**

- Coursework essay (2,500 words, contributing 40% to your module mark) on an essay question listed at the end of this syllabus.

  **Due: Monday 14 March 2016, BEFORE 4pm, on KEATS**

  Feedback will be available on KEATS no later than Monday 18 April 2016. Feedback tutorials will offer further guidance on improving your work.

- Unseen written exam (2 hours, contributing 60% to your module mark): 2 out of at least 5 questions must be answered.
  The examination will take place in Period II (May-June 2016).

  The most recent exam past papers will be available in the KEATS module area of 5AAT2014.

**Scope of assessment**

Coursework essay questions generally relate to topics covered in the first half of the module. Examination questions normally deal with most of the remaining topics, but care is taken to avoid overlap across both sets of questions. Some examination questions may be formulated so as to encourage analysis, in the same answer, of topics that were investigated in different sessions, including those that fell early in the module.

**What is a good essay/exam answer?**

- Good essays and examination answers will demonstrate a nuanced grasp of any topic, an awareness of its anthropological contexts and a capacity to develop a well-reasoned argument that is convincingly supported by reference to suitable evidence and is presented in a structured manner using clear English.
- For more details please see the link to marking criteria below (“Essential Information”).
- Best approaches to essay writing will be discussed as part of the teaching programme in the module. Students should seek advice if they are unsure of anything.
Essential information: How do I submit my essay?

• **The Faculty of Arts & Humanities cover-sheet** needs to be the first page of the submitted essays; please follow this link: [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/trs/study/handbook/assessment/taught/submission.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/trs/study/handbook/assessment/taught/submission.aspx)

• **The candidate number** (e.g. W01234) on the cover-sheet needs to be accurate and of the present academic year. Your work cannot be attributed to you on the College systems, if this information is incomplete or wrong.

• **The word limit** includes all footnotes/endnotes, but excludes the bibliography, which you should provide. There is a 5% tolerance: no penalty will be incurred for essays that are up to 5% over the word limit. Beyond that tolerance band, two marks will be deducted for every 5% of excess words until 50% is reached. After 50%, three marks will normally be deducted for each further 5% of excess words.

• **The MHRA/Harvard reference style** has been adopted for this module. Please find the *Quick Guide to Reference Styles in TRS* in the TRS Handbook online. The presentation of your work, including the insertion of page numbers, quality of referencing and bibliographical information and the standard of English, has a strong bearing on the mark given for it.

• **Submission BEFORE 4pm**: Your work must be submitted via the assessment submission section of the KEATS area for the module, by the published deadline, i.e. before 4pm on the relevant day.

  Work with a TurnitIn time stamp of 4.00pm counts as a late submission (see next point).

• **Late submissions** will be treated as follows:
  
  Unless an extension has been granted by the Chair of the UG Programme Board of Examiners on the basis of a Mitigating Circumstances Form (MCF), supplied with supporting evidence, or comes to be granted retrospectively:
  
  - Work submitted within 24 hours after the original deadline will be marked, but the mark for this element will be capped at the pass mark of 40%.
  
  - Work submitted more than 24 hours after the original deadline will not be marked, and the submission will receive a mark of zero.

• **Mitigating Circumstances Forms**: MCFs can be downloaded from the Policy Zone of the College website.

  **Extensions retrospectively**: An extension may be granted retrospectively, providing the MCF with supporting documentation is submitted no later than 7 days after the missed assessment and supporting documentation has been received no later than 21 days after the missed assessment. Please note that extensions are granted by the TRS Assessment Board Chair and NOT by individual module tutors.

• **Plagiarism**: Please make sure that you understand the College rules on plagiarism. Information is available at: [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/library/help/plagiarism/index.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/library/help/plagiarism/index.aspx), and you should also have been enrolled on a KEATS plagiarism module.

• **Oral presentations and plagiarism**: The College’s rules on plagiarism apply to oral presentations, handouts and Powerpoint presentations just as they do to written work submitted for assessment. You must acknowledge any and all sources used in presentations and accompanying material, and must present all material in your own words except for explicitly acknowledged quotations from others.
4. Essay Questions

Please choose ONE question (You should aim to include THREE ethnographic studies in your essay):

1. How does the study of ancestors, spirits, gods, and/or ghosts inform our understanding of ritual and the course of life?

2. Discuss the importance of generational continuity in EITHER rites of passage OR popular religion in China.

3. Discuss how religion is made a part of everyday life experience through ‘items’ of material culture, such as houses, clothing, money, saddles, sledges, or names.

4. Discuss how childhood and learning is shaped through religious knowledge and practice.

5. Discuss the role of shamans in mediating dangerous forces between the human world and the spirit world.