

UGC296U / ANT2340
Fall 2009
Thurs. 7-8 (14:30-16:15)
Classroom: MMW LT1

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MAGIC, MYTH, AND THE SUPERNATURAL

This course will examine phenomena often viewed as irrational and superstitious to see how they can be understood in cultural terms. All societies have some belief in another world, yet beliefs vary widely between societies. The course will examine the truth-value of many beliefs (are there vampires and UFOs?), but will focus especially on understanding why humans hold “unscientific” beliefs and how they make sense in cultural terms. The course will examine traditional anthropological topics such as magic, traditional healing, divination, *fengshui*, witchcraft, and ghosts, as well as more recent issues such as ESP, psychokinesis, qigong, vampires, zombies, monsters, UFOs and alien abduction. The role of myth in modern society and the cultural creation of reality will be highlighted. Examples from contemporary industrial societies, especially the United States and Hong Kong, will be used to challenge notions of “modern (or Western) rationality” as well as “traditional superstition.” The power of a cultural approach in explaining the supernatural and the limits of what science can explain will also be discussed.

Readings for this course are from non-specialist magazines and specially selected for a General Education course; all university-educated adults should be able to read these kinds of articles. Students should do the readings *before* class, especially those students who feel their English is weak. The readings will help you learn the vocabulary of the lecture. You are also expected to contribute to the discussion in class and in the tutorial. (The “Participation” component of the grade is not a grade of how brilliant comments are, but only whether you participate or not—by asking and answering questions, making comments, etc.)

Outlines of the lectures (the PowerPoint slides) will be posted at least one day before the lecture on Moodle at <http://moodle.cuhk.edu.hk> Note that the illustrations are removed in cases where I do not have copyright (but I can use them in class for educational purposes). Any updates for the course will also be posted there.

What you will learn:

Students taking this course will:

- learn to see the cultural nature of reality and of the supernatural;
- understand how many apparently irrational and bizarre beliefs make sense in their cultural contexts;
- learn how to use critical thinking while at the same time being tolerant of other views;
- develop a healthy scientific skepticism, while at the same time remaining open to new ideas;
- be able to analyze other cases of new and unusual beliefs that will emerge later in life.

Readings and Books:

All readings, including the following edited books, have been placed on reserve in the University Library. For articles in edited volumes, be sure to search for chapters by the **book title or editor's name**, not by author's name:

Evans, Grant, and Maria Tam Siu-mi, eds. 1997 *Hong Kong: The Anthropology of a Chinese Metropolis*.

Frazier, Kendrick, ed. 1981 *Paranormal Borderlands of Science*

Lehmann, Arthur C., and James E. Myers, eds. 1993 and 2001 *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (3rd edition and 5th edition).

Other recommended readings will be suggested in class and on the Moodle page. I also recommend students be familiar with the *Star Wars* movies and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling. *Harry Potter* is sold in all bookstores, including the University Bookstore. It is not

required reading, but since we will talk about it in discussing magic and myths, reading the book or seeing the movie may be helpful. It is available in Chinese, but I highly recommend reading it in the original (it is said to be written at a level a 10 year old can understand). It is magical and fun.

Topics:

1) Introduction; Magic (10 Sept.)

Gmelch, George "Baseball Magic." In Lehmann and Myers 5th edition (a revised version) (Also in Spradley & McCurdy 2003, pp. 348-357). [A famous article that discusses magic in sports and introduces the anthropological analysis of magic across cultures.]

2) Urban Legends and Rumors (17 Sept.)

Brunvand, Jan Harold 1981 Chapters 1 & 3 in *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*, pp. 1-16, 47-69. [An introduction to urban legends and some famous examples from the USA.]

3) Ghosts and Spirits (24 Sept.)

Evans, Grant "Ghosts and the New Governor: The Anthropology of a Hong Kong Rumor." In Grant Evans and Maria Tam Siu-mi, eds. *Hong Kong: The Anthropology of a Chinese Metropolis*, pp. 267-296. [This is an analysis of the case of the ghost(s) in the 1992 KCR commercial.]

Freed, Stanley A. and Ruth S. Freed "Taraka's Ghost" in Lehmann and Myers (3rd ed.) pp. 287-291. (Also in Spradley & McCurdy 2003 *Conformity and Conflict*, pp. 341-347). [This is a famous Indian example of possession by a ghost.]

4) Divination (8 Oct.)

Hyman, Ray "Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers That You Know All About Them." In Kendrick Frazier, ed. *Paranormal Borderlands of Science*, pp. 79-96. [A key article that explains how fortune-telling works]

Rapport, Nigel. 1988. "A Policeman's Construction of 'The Truth': Sergeant Hibbs and the Lie-Detector Machine." *Anthropology Today* 4(1):7-11 (available from the ULI online through JSTOR) [This article shows how the "lie detector" machine is a form of divination. Keep in mind as you read this article that the lie detector is not reliable (though it claims to be scientific), and that the result of the test itself is *not* admissible in court, though if the suspect confesses to the operator, that confession is admissible.]

5) Witchcraft and Evil Eye (15 Oct.)

Burke, Charlanne. "Witchcraft Tswana Style." In James Spradley and David McCurdy *Conformity and Conflict* 11th Edition, pp. 358-370. [An example of contemporary witchcraft in Africa].

Luhrmann, Tanya. "The Goat and the Gazelle: Witchcraft." In William A. Haviland and Robert J. Gordon, eds. *Talking About People: Readings in Contemporary Cultural Anthropology* (1993 edition), pp.232-239. [An example of modern witchcraft in England]

6) Shamanism (22 Oct.)

Howells, William "The Shaman: A Siberian Spiritualist." In Lehmann and Myers (all editions) [This article describes the classic example of shamanism.]

Harner, Michael. 2003 (orig. 1980). "Discovering the Way." In Harvey, Graham, ed. 2003. *Shamanism: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 41-56. [Harner describes how he was initiated into the practice of shamanism. A good example of the complex combination of pharmacology, cosmology, psychology and sociology of shamanism.]

7) Midterm (29 Oct.) No tutorial for this week.

8) Traditional healing (5 Nov.)

Dubisch, Jill "You are What You Eat: Religious Aspects of the Health Food Movement." In Lehmann and Myers (3rd ed. pp. 55-63; 5th edition pp. 73-81). [This article shows how whether something is viewed as "health food" in the US is as much determined by our symbolic system for classifying foods as by biomedical facts.]

Dodes, John E. 1997 "The Mysterious Placebo." *Skeptical Inquirer* 21(1):44-5 (avail. online). [This brief article explains the placebo effect, or how just thinking you are taking a medicine can make you better.]

9) Vampires and Monsters (12 Nov.)

Barber, Paul "The Real Vampire" in Lehmann and Myers (3rd ed. pp. 307-312) (5th ed. 318-323). [The author discovers that the original stories of vampires in Eastern Europe are based on how the body decomposes. Do not read right after eating!]

Evans, Grant 1993 "Bringing the mermaid myth back to port." (SCMP handout) [A short newspaper article about a rumor about a mermaid in 1993 Hong Kong. Why does the author have to write back to the SCMP after they cut the last paragraph of his article?]

Jones, David E. 2000 Chapter 7 "Fate of the Dragons" in *An Instinct for Dragons* pp. 113-119. [The author asks why all cultures have dragons, and why we fear dragons. Do you agree with the author?]

10) Myths (19 Nov.)

Bierlein, J. F. 1999 "Myths of Nature and Human Nature" in *Living Myths: How Myth Gives Meaning to Human Experience*. New York: Ballantine. Pp. 91-98. [This chapter looks at a Greek myth, and teases out some of its meanings]

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 (pp. 151-172 in small font 1991 edition of the book with few illustrations). [This chapter, from a popular book and video (also available at the UC video library) discusses the hero in myth.]

11) UFOs and Alien Abduction (26 Nov.)

Huston, Peter. 1992. "Night Terrors, Sleep Paralysis, and Devil Stricken Telephone Cords From Hell." *Skeptical Inquirer* 17(1):64-68 (avail. online). Also in Kendrick Frazier, ed. 1998. *Encounters with the Paranormal* pp. 294-299. [A short article on vivid images we have as we fall asleep and as we wake up.]

Korff, Kal K. 1997 "What Really Happened at Roswell" *Skeptical Inquirer* 21(4):24-32 (avail. online).

Glidenberg, Bernard D., and David E. Thomas 1998 "Case Closed: Reflections on the 1997 Air Force Roswell Report." *Skeptical Inquirer* 22(3):31-36 (avail. online). [These two articles present the skeptical and official versions of the Roswell case.]

12) Conclusion: "Superstition," Relativism, and Science (3 Dec.)

Sagan, Carl "The Burden of Skepticism" in Lehmann and Myers (3rd ed. pp. 371-376) (5th ed. pp. 384-389). [The late Carl Sagan, an astrophysicist, discusses why we must be skeptical, but not be cynical or closed-minded.]

Lewis, I. M. "The Anthropologist's Encounter with the Supernatural." In Lehmann and Myers (3rd ed.) pp. 18-23. [The author, an anthropologist, argues that we can never conclusively exclude the possibility of supernatural beings.]

13) Final Exam: to be centrally scheduled.

Course Requirements:

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| Mid-term exam: | 40% |
| Final (centrally scheduled): | 50% |
| Participation: | 10% |

Exams include about 30% MC questions, 40% short answers, and 30% essay. The MC questions test whether students learned and can recognize basic concepts and ideas, the short answer questions require students to list, describe, and explain concepts and phenomena. The essay question requires students to apply what they've learned, often by analyzing a new case similar to what we discussed in class. Essay questions often focus on major themes that we discuss in more than one lecture. Students normally can choose from more than one essay question. Exams do not require memorization, but understanding.

The participation component is only based on whether students ask or answer questions in class and tutorials; you are not being judged during class for the quality of comments, but only on whether you are prepared (have done the readings) and participate. Students get a score (plus, check, or minus) after each session, and the total is used to calculate the grade. Each tutorial is a learning experience, a chance to explore and debate ideas presented in lectures and readings. Make sure you take advantage of it.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please contact me or one of the TAs:

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