SPRING 2017
SYMBOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY
ANTH 4135/6135

Tuesday, Thursday 2-3:20

Hung Shing Temple, Kau Sai Chau Island, Hong Kong Territory
March 2014. @milicic
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Description: Anthropologists and other social and behavioral scientists often debate the interaction between nature and culture. This course argues that the foundation of human culture is based on our capacity to produce symbols. Culture cannot exist without symbols. We will explore the anthropological approach to various facets of symbolism and meaning by looking at both human biological make up and cultural variation. The course provides the basis for an understanding of the unity of the human mind and describes and explains cross-cultural differences. The basic theoretical assumption is that universal cognitive processes organize our perception of the world, while each culture chooses a particular interpretation through its worldview or cosmology. This hypothesis will be tested on various ethnographic examples.

We will review classic theories, models, and ethnographies in anthropology as well as the recent findings on symbolic communication in anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and cognitive studies with examples ranging from prehistory to the contemporary Western culture. We will study the symbolism of colors, food, animals, human body, gender, art, myth, ritual, and politics. We will study examples of world mythology, as well as the symbolic meanings in the worldviews of the native Pueblos of the American Southwest, China, India, Mexico, central and South Africa, Iceland, Jewish culture, Polynesia, and mainstream American cultures.

Course objectives: At the end of this course students

- will acquire knowledge about basic cognitive tools and processes that humans use in communication.
- will acquire knowledge about models, theories, and ethnographies in cultural anthropology as well as important work in the area of physical anthropology and human cognition.
- will learn how to integrate knowledge about human universals as outcomes of natural selection with culturally constructed meanings
- will be able to analyze and interpret systems of meaning across a wide range of cultures
- will learn how to do independent research, construct an argument, analyze their data and apply the knowledge acquired in this class in their term paper assignment.
- will be able to cross-reference and apply knowledge acquired in this class across the wide range of fields such as linguistics, psychology, human biology, history, philosophy, marketing and business, literature, and art.

This course is accessible to all majors.
Texts:


Additional Readings on Canvas and Marriott Library Reserve

Teaching philosophy and methods:
This class consists of lectures, in-class discussions (strongly encouraged!), and several films shown. Teaching is a process of exchanging and engaging thoughts. It is giving and receiving.

Exams and grades
Three exams (two in-class midterms and final in-class exam 100 points each).

- Term research paper (6-7 pages, double space, Times 12, 100 points) Term paper is a project based on students’ individual interests. The paper is graded on: 1. Content: well-formulated argument, good examples, application of knowledge gained in this class (70 points.) 2. Style: organization, spelling, concise writing, proper use of references (30 points). The instructor will provide detailed guidelines.

- Term paper outline: title, two paragraphs of the content and at least two bibliographical references (20 points)

Graduate students: Three exams (see above)

Graduate students are expected and strongly encouraged to participate in class!

The grade is calculated as a percentage of 420 possible points (460 for graduate students) or the highest score in class. Participation in class brings additional points.