

# ANTH 195 Language, Magic, and the Supernatural

Fall 2018

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## Course Description

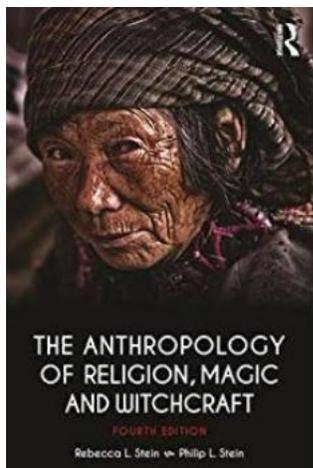
How do different cultures around the world use magic, and how do they use language to communicate with the supernatural? An introduction to the anthropological study of ritual language and magic, this course examines linguistic practices and their intersections with various systems of spiritual beliefs around the world. The course focuses on various forms of ritual language which include the language of spells and incantations, the language of divination, trance and possession speech, and various forms of prayers. Examples are drawn from different cultures around the world, from the poison oracle used for divination by the Azande, to the trance speech of followers of possession cults in Venezuela; Our exploration of the interconnections of language, magic, and the supernatural concludes with an examination of magical languages in fictional works, in Tolkien's oeuvre and in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*.

## Learning outcomes

This course fulfills the General Education Cross-Cultural (XC) requirement. To meet the XC requirement, this course:

1. Devotes reading and class time to the examination of cross linguistic and cross cultural data from a variety of peoples around the world, for example Trobriand Islanders, Azande, Koreans, Siberians, Zuni, Mexicans, and Papua New Guineans, to name a few.
2. Explores the interconnections of history, ideology, religious systems and linguistic practices in the groups addressed in the readings and in lecture.
3. Adopts a cross-cultural and comparative approach to the study of linguistic practices and their intersections with various systems of spiritual beliefs around the world.
4. Addresses the impact of colonial history on religious and linguistic practices in different cultures around the world.
5. Confronts the problems raised by ethnocentrism and cultural relativism by examining ritual practices that are sacred to the followers of a specific religion or cult, and may be difficult to understand to outsiders.
6. Includes exercises which demonstrate an understanding of the issues and methodologies used in the anthropological study of ritual language and magic.

## Requirements and Policies



### Required Texts

Textbook:

Stein, Rebecca and Philip Stein. *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Fourth edition. 2016. Routledge: New York

(Available for purchase at the College Store)

Readings posted on Moodle as assigned (see calendar of assigned readings below)

### Attendance and punctuality

Attendance is mandatory and very important in this class. I will be taking attendance every day. Every unexcused absence will result in the loss of 1% of your **final** grade (which is based on a 100% scale). Absences for illness or university-related activities must be properly documented by written notice. You will be responsible for any work missed.

The first minutes of class are often used for taking attendance and making course-related announcements, discussing updates to the syllabus, doing pop-up quizzes, etc., so please be punctual. To encourage punctuality, no sign-up list will be circulated in class. If you enter the classroom as I am taking attendance and I have already called out your name, please talk to me at the end of the class so I can take your attendance. ***Please keep in mind that it is your responsibility to be in time for attendance and to let me know you were in class if you arrived after I called your name.***

### Grading Scale

#### Grade Breakdown

Midterm exams (2): 20%  
Final exam (1): 25%  
Altar project: 25%  
Pop-up quizzes: 5%  
Participation: 5%

93-100	4.0	(A)
90-92	3.7	(A-)
87-89	3.3	(B+)
83-86	3.0	(B)
80-82	2.7	(B-)
77-79	2.3	(C+)
73-76	2.0	(C)
70-72	1.7	(C-)
67-69	1.3	(D+)
60-66	1.0	(D)
below 60	0.0	(F)

### **Participation**

Participation is worth 5% of your final grade. To earn a good participation grade, I expect you to:

- 1) Come to all the classes, and *in time*.
- 2) Prepare for class. I expect you to do a critical reading of the course materials, and come ready to ask and be asked about anything in the readings. If you feel uncomfortable speaking in public, you will have other chances to participate in small group classroom activities, discussing selected topics with a partner in class, etc.
- 3) "Participating" also means "paying attention," and therefore, the (mis)use of media in class is strongly discouraged. I strongly prefer that you do not bring/open laptops in class—unless you are instructed otherwise by me—, and that you practice old-fashioned note-taking by hand. If this represents a serious problem for you, please let me know privately. ***Please do not use your cell phones to take pictures of the power point presentations that will be shown in lecture. This would completely defeat the purpose of practicing and developing your note-taking skills.***

### **Midterms and Final Exam**

There will be two midterms and a final exam, which will be comprehensive. Please do not ask for make-ups, unless you have a very compelling reason (e.g., serious illness) which can be adequately documented by written notice.

### **Pop-up Quizzes**

To encourage you to keep up with the readings, occasionally pop-up quizzes about the assigned readings will be given in class, which will be graded on a pass/fail basis. As a whole, all the quizzes are worth 5% of your grade. The quizzes will be given at the beginning of class, so be sure not to miss them! ***No quiz make-ups will be given if you are late or have an unexcused absence.***

### **Day of the Dead Altar Project**

You will be assigned to a group of students, and together you will build a Day of the Dead Altar that will be presented to the rest of the class. You will be evaluated on the quality of the altar you build, your presentation/exposition, and a 3-5 page paper that you will write in preparation for your presentation, describing all the elements you have included in your Altar.

### **Academic Honesty**

You are expected to comply with the SUNY Potsdam standards of academic integrity. For further information about what this means and for plagiarism guidelines, please check the SUNY Potsdam Academic Honor Code website:

<http://www.potsdam.edu/studentlife/studentconduct/honorcode/>

### **Accommodations**

If you need any special accommodations based on a documented disability or other special learning needs, please make an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss appropriate accommodations that may be helpful in successfully completing this course. Students with special learning needs are also encouraged to contact Sharon House, Coordinator of Accommodative Services (267-3267) to discuss additional support services.



**Calendar of topics and assigned readings**  
**Please continue to check this page during the semester.**  
**Updates will be posted periodically on Moodle.**

## PART I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE, MAGIC, AND WITCHCRAFT

#### **Week 1: Introduction to the anthropological study of language and magic**

Aug 28. Introduction, review of the syllabus

Aug 30. What is anthropology? Introduction to the anthropological study of language and ritual.

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 1: "The anthropological perspective" 1-15.

#### **Week 2: Defining Language**

Sept 4. What is language? Common myths about language

Tamasi & Antieau. *Language and Linguistic Diversity in the US. An Introduction*. Chapter 1: 1-3

Sept 6. What is a symbol?

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 3 "Religious symbols" 58-69

#### **Week 3: Defining Magic**

Sept 11. What is magic?

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 7 "The nature of magic" 145-149.

Sept 13. Cross cultural variation in the practice of Magic

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 7 "Magic in society" 149-154

#### **Week 4: Witchcraft and Sorcery**

Sept 18. What is witchcraft?

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 10 "The concept of witchcraft in small-scale societies" 233-238.

Sept 20. Anthropological explanations to witchcraft

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 10 "Euro-American witchcraft beliefs" 239-241 and "Functions of Euro-American witchcraft beliefs" 244-246

**Day of the Dead Altar Groups Assigned**

**Week 5: Religious specialists, shamanism and healing**

Sept 25. Shamanism

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 6 Shamans 127-131

Sept 27. Priests, healers, diviners

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 6 Priests, other specialists 135-140



**Week 6.**

Oct 2. Review (no readings assigned)

Oct 4. Midterm 1

**PART II**

**RITUAL LANGUAGE AND MAGICAL LANGUAGE**

**Week 7: Introduction to the study of ritual language**

Oct 9. Fall break, no class

Oct 11. Speech Act Theory

Austin, J.L. How to do Things with Words. 1962. Reprinted in Blum, Susan. *Making Sense of Language*. Oxford University Press 2009.

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 4 "The basics of ritual performance," 82-84.

**Week 8: Ritual (continued). Divination**

Oct 16. What is ritual?

Stein & Stein. *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 4 "A survey of rituals" and "Rites of passage" 84-96.

Oct 18. Forms and techniques of divination

Stein & Stein *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 7. Divination. 154-165

**Week 9: Divination (continued). Communicating with the dead.**

**Oct 23. The language of divination**

E.E. Evans Pritchard "Consulting the Poison Oracle among the Azande" 282-287

Tedlock, Barbara. *Time and the Highland Maya*. Chapter 6: The blood speaks: 133-147.

**Oct 25. Communicating with the Dead**

Stein & Stein *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 8 "Souls and ancestors", "Bodies and souls" 172-191

**Week 10: Student presentations**

In preparation for your presentations, please read:

Brandes, Stanley. *Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: Celebrations of Death in Mexico and Beyond*. Chapter 1 Introduction. The Day of the Dead, Problems and Paradoxes 3-16

Chapter 6 The Day of the Dead and Halloween 117-130

Stein & Stein *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 8 "Days of Death" 198-200

**Oct 30. Student Presentations I**

**Nov 1. Student Presentations II**

**Week 10: Trance speech**

**Nov 6. Altered states of consciousness**

Stein & Stein *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 5 "The nature of altered states of consciousness" and "Ethnographic examples of altered states of consciousness" 110-120

Kearney, M. Oral performance by Mexican spiritualists in possession trance. In *Journal of Latin American Lore* 3(2):309-328

**Nov 8. Trance speech. The Cult of Maria Lionza in Venezuela / The Talking Crosses of Yucatan**

Ferrándiz, Francisco 2004 *The Body as Wound. Possession, Malandros and Everyday Violence in Venezuela*. *Critique of Anthropology*, 24 (2): 107-133

Ferrándiz, Francisco 2009

Open Veins. *Spirits of Violence in Venezuela*. *Ethnography* Vol 10(1): 39-61



**Week 11.**

Nov 13. Review (no readings assigned)

Nov 15. Midterm 2

### **PART III: Mythology, magical languages, and fiction**

#### **Week 12 Mythology**

##### Nov 20: Mythology

Stein & Stein *The anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Chapter 2: "The nature of myths" 32-37 "Common themes in myths" 48-54

##### Nov 22: Thanksgiving break, no class

#### **Week 13. Magical languages in fictional works**

##### Nov 27. The languages of Tolkien

Robbins, Susan. Beauty in Language: Tolkien's Phonology and Phonaesthetics as a Source of Creativity and Inspiration for the Lord of the Rings. *Man & the Word / Zmogus ir zodis*;2013, Vol. 15 Issue 1, p183-191.

##### Nov 29: The languages of Tolkien continued

Readings TBA

#### **Week 14 Magical languages in fictional works continued**

##### Dec 4: The language of spells and incantations in Harry Potter

DuPree, M. Severus Snape and the Standard Book of Spells: Ancient Tongues in the Wizardry World. In *Harry Potter and History*, N. Reagan (ed.). New Jersey: Wiley. 39-53. 2011.

##### Dec 6: Wrap up and review

No readings assigned