

ALTERNATIVE REALITIES: SYMBOLS, RITUAL AND WORLD VIEW



Fall - 2002

CLASS PERIOD -- T-Th 9:40 – 11:10
CLASS ROOM -- 100 Clough
OFFICE -- 105 Clough

PROFESSOR -- Susan Kus
OFFICE HOURS – M, F 1-2; Th 8:30-9:30,
or by appointment

COURSE STATEMENT:

Humans are always searching for meaning and order beyond the limits of the activities that are needed to guarantee their immediate survival. This course will consider the role of symbolic activity in the construction of meaning that integrates human experience with the workings of the larger world. This course will hopefully allow us to come to view non-Western symbol systems and world views as valid, coherent and meaningful ways to order and understand the “reality” of human existence as experienced by “others”. The ability to grant credibility and intellectual respect to other cultural systems of behaviour and belief should not be limited to anthropologists.

Perhaps the truly astonishing thing about an astonishing world is that it is both affirmable and deniable. It is constructable and deconstructable. There is a sublime or ‘aweful’ (as they say in Indian English) existential wonderment in the recognition that your capacity to affirm some astonishing world or deny it, to construct it or deconstruct it, depends, quite crucially, on whether we take our stand in that world or whether we take our stand in some other equally astonishing world. Or perhaps what is most truly astonishing of all is that when ‘thinking through cultures’ there is no place else, no neutral place, for us to stand.

(Shweder, R. in Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology)

It is a tragedy of incredible proportion that with each passing hour the world witnesses the passing of languages and cultures of “first peoples.”

The ultimate tragedy is not that archaic societies are disappearing but rather that vibrant, dynamic, living cultures and languages are being forced out of existence. At risk is a vast archive of knowledge and expertise, a catalogue of the imagination, an oral and written literature composed of the memories of countless elders and healers, warriors, farmers, fishermen, midwives, poets, and saints. In short, the artistic, intellectual and spiritual expression of the full complexity and diversity of the human experience.

(W. Davis in Light at the Edge of the World)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance is mandatory, thus more than one unexcused absence may lower your grade significantly. The mid-term and the final exams will be take-home essay exams. You will be asked to do a few short writing assignments as well as two longer papers. Paper I will be due on **October 10** and Paper II will be due **December 3**. The papers should conform to the Style Guidelines of the journal,

American Anthropologist. (Late papers will not be accepted except in the case of very extenuating circumstances. Should such a case arise permission to turn in a late paper needs to be obtained before the paper is due.)

Failure to adequately complete any assignment or to take any exam could result in a failing grade for the course. Unexcused absences and/or failure to participate in class can lower your grade significantly. In the case of a significant number (more than 3) of absences a failing grade will be assigned for the course. You are asked to self-report on absences.

Incompletes are not normally given in this class. In the rare case where an incomplete may be in order, the student must obtain permission from the instructor and complete all paper work for the Registrar before the day of the final exam.

GRADING

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|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Exercise and class participation..... | 10% |
| Writing assignments..... | 10% |
| Paper I..... | 15% |
| Paper II | 25% |
| Mid-term exam | 20% |
| Final Exam | <u>20%</u> |
| | 100% |

BOOKS TO BE PURCHASED

Ong, Walter Orality and Literacy

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson Metaphors We Live By

Fabian, Stephen Patterns in the Sky: An Introduction to Ethnoastronomy

Kehoe, Alice Beck Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Ridington, Robin "Fox and Chickadee," in The American Indian and the Problem of History. (Calvin Martin, ed.) New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 128-135.

Eliade, Mircea "Observations on the symbolism of shells," in Images & Symbols. (Philip Mairet, trans.) New York: Sheed & Ward. 1961, pp.125-150.

Langer, Suzanne K. "The New Key," Chapter 1 in Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957, pp. 3-25.

(1) Fernandez, James "Edification by Puzzlement" in Explorations in African Systems of Thought. (Karp, Ivan and Charles Bird, eds.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1980, pp. 44-59.

Guédon, Marie Françoise "Dene ways and the ethnographer's culture," in Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters, Young & Goulet (eds.). Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1994, pp. 39-70.

Geertz, Clifford “Ethos, world view, and the analysis of sacred symbols.” Chapter 5 in The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books, 1973, pp. 126-141.

Snyder, Gary “The place, the region and the commons,” in The Practice of the Wild. San Francisco, North Point, 1990, pp. 25-47.

Shepard, Paul “Imitating Animals: The Cast of Characters.” Chapter 4," in Thinking Animals. New York: Viking Press, 1978, pp. 116-147.

(2) **Fernandez, James** "Persuasions and Performances: Of the beast in every body and the metaphors of every man" in Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 3 - 27.

Basso, Keith “Wisdom sits in places,” in Senses of Place, S. Feld and JK. Basso (eds.). Santa Fe, School of American Research Press, 1996, pp. 53-90.

Kus, Susan and Victor Raharijaona “House to palace, village to state: Scaling up architecture and ideology,” in American Anthropologist, December 1999.

Csordas, Thomas J. “Embodiment as a paradigm for Anthropology,” in Ethos, 1988, 18:5-47.

Stephen, Michele “Cargo Cults, Cultural Creativity and Autonomous Imagination,” in Ethos, 333-358.

Sharp, Henry S. “Experiencing meaning,” in Anthropology and Humanism, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1996, pp. 171-186.

Kus, Susan “An archaeologist’s imagination: Sympathetic magic or studied audacity?” Paper delivered at the Society for American Archaeology 67th Annual Meeting, Denver, March 2002 in session entitled “Between materiality and interpretation: Archaeological confessions,” organized by Chad Gifford and Kirsten Olson.



Nov 19 Shamanism **DISCUSS** Kehoe Chapters 1-4
21 **NO CLASS** -- American Anthropological Assoc. Meetings (replaced by take home midterm)

Nov 26 Shamanism (cont.) **DISCUSS** Kehoe remaining chapters
28 **THANKSGIVING RECESS**

Dec 3 **Presentations Paper II**
5 The anthropologist in face of alternative reality *Sharp, *Kus

Dec 10 Concluding remarks **Take-home final exam handed out,**
due at 11 a. m. on Monday December 16th

RESEARCH PAPER

Paper 1

Choose one from the following two themes for your first research paper assignment.

(1) **“Symbols are good to think.”** Choose a symbol that appears to be universal and/or compelling (e.g., sun, moon, tree, bird, turtle, swastika, jaguar, anaconda, coyote ...) and “think about it.” What does this symbol evoke? Why and how? (Look at different cultures, history, works of contemporary artists and poets, etc.) Does it always “mean” the same thing? Then “think with this symbol” to work your way through a contemporary problem or issue.

(2) **“Inventing symbols.”** Explore some contemporary issue that involves the creation and use of symbols and/or ritual such as the confederate flag, “power crystals”, the Cotton Festival, Mardi-Gras, Rainbow, etc. What can our own society’s understanding, use and abuse of symbol and ritual add to the discussion of symbol and ritual in general?

Paper 2

You will be asked to design and complete a term paper that investigates some aspect of one of the following themes.

(1) The individual in face of alternative contexts of meaning: the explorer, the missionary, the conqueror and the conquered.

(2) “Bizarre” human practices that need to be understood in order to appreciate the limits of human creativity, dignity and infamy.

(3) It is possible for you to design an “alternatively meaningful” term paper in consultation with me.