

## **Anthropology 424:**

### **The Supernatural in the Modern World**

**Instructor:** Dr. Magliocco

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**Office hours:** MW 2:00 – 4:00 PM and by appointment

#### **I. Objectives**

The “supernatural” is a category of beliefs, phenomena and experiences unique to Western cultures which developed as a result of Enlightenment discourses separating notions of the rational from the irrational. Yet despite stigmatization by church and state structures in the West, and predictions that supernatural belief would vanish as populations became more educated, supernatural practices and beliefs are still very much alive. This course explores why and how this happened. We will examine supernatural and occult traditions as they appear in the context of religion, narrative, folk healing, folk drama, ritual and media accounts and presentations. We will also study how scholars from various disciplines have approached these topics.

This course does not attempt to prove or disprove the existence of supernatural phenomena. Rather, it takes an ethnographic, phenomenological approach to this issue, focusing on people’s lived experience and their attempts to make sense of it. Students will be encouraged to explore the relationship between scientific belief and supernatural belief in the context of the contemporary post-modern landscape.

As a result of this course, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate critical knowledge and understanding of the concept of the “supernatural” in Western discourse;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the different ways contact with the supernatural has been experienced and interpreted in diverse cultures;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the theories anthropologists and folklorists have used to make sense of supernatural beliefs and experiences;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between spiritual beliefs and practices, stigmatization, and the politics of inclusion and exclusion;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the reasons behind the popularity of supernatural legends, fads, and esoteric religions in the contemporary world;
- Demonstrate information competency in evaluating sources of information about supernatural, esoteric, magical and spiritual topics;
- Demonstrate the ability to collect, describe, analyze and interpret anthropological and folkloric data on supernatural belief and practice according to accepted professional anthropological and folkloristic standards.

## II. Form and Requirements

This course combines lecture presentations and films with participatory activities and class discussions. Student attendance and participation are crucial to the success of this course. Attendance entails not missing more than 2 class meetings, notifying the instructor in cases of prolonged absence, arriving on time and staying for the duration of the class. *Leaving during the break will count as an absence!* Students are expected to come to class prepared, e.g. having read the day's assignment and taken notes on it. Study guides will be provided to help you concentrate on the most important ideas in the readings; these will be downloadable from the class website on Moodle. ***It is your responsibility to download study guides for each week's reading, as well as for films!*** Class discussions and test questions will be based on the study guides, so you are strongly encouraged to use them. Participation means contributing at least once a week to classroom and/or online discussions with an original, substantive, pertinent comment, remark, question or idea. Because we will be meeting only once a week, Moodle discussions will allow you to post your comments to the class and instructor during the rest of the week, increasing your opportunities for participation.

We will often be discussing controversial and potentially contentious material in this class. This classroom is safe space; discussions must remain civil regardless of your feelings about an issue or opinion. I expect you to maintain a considerate attitude towards me and other students in the class. This includes not interrupting others, not monopolizing classroom discussion and being respectful of opinions different from your own. Any student who repeatedly behaves in an uncivil manner during class will be asked to leave.

This course requires a substantial amount of reading and writing. If you are not able or willing to meet these expectations, do not take this class.

**The use of cell phones, MP3s, and similar devices is not permitted during class. If you have these items, please turn them off before coming to class. If I see you use them during class, I will take them away from you for the remainder of the lesson. The use of laptop computers is permitted only for note-taking. Laptops used for other purposes will similarly be confiscated and returned at the end of the lesson.**

**Required readings:** The following texts are required reading for this course and are available for purchase at the Matador Bookstore and on reserve in Oviatt Library:

Susan Greenwood, *The Anthropology of Magic*  
Karen Brown, *Mama Lola: a Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*  
Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*  
Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neopaganism in America*

**Additional required readings** are available online in downloadable pdf format on the Moodle website for this class. ***You are responsible for downloading all required reading from Moodle!***

You are responsible for doing all of the assigned readings on a weekly basis. Material

from the readings will appear on the tests, and is a valuable source of bibliography for final papers. While copies of all required books will be placed on reserve, you are encouraged to purchase them. Keep in mind that there may be many students trying to get hold of reserve readings, especially around exams, and you may not get a chance to read them unless you own them.

**Exams:** There will be two tests, both in essay and short-answer format. Each will be worth 25% of the final grade. If you must miss a test due to illness, you need to notify me before class on the day of the test, either by email or by phone (818-677-3331). When you return to class, we can schedule a make-up. **No notification, no make-up -- no exceptions!**

**Final project:** Each student will complete a 10-page final research paper and poster on a topic relating to the course, using theories and principles discussed in the course to analyze material. Projects may be based on fieldwork in the community, material from the Folklore Archives on campus, library research, or a combination of these. Creative projects (films, videos, exhibits, multi-media presentations, group projects) may also be accepted, with the instructor's prior consent. On the last day of class, students will present their poster and a brief summary of their research to the class. Student posters will be exhibited as part of the Anthro Expo in Spring 2009. Three outstanding papers will be selected to be presented by their authors on a scholarly panel at the Anthro Expo. Graduate students taking ANTH 424 are expected to write a 20 pp. research paper for their final project. The paper/ project is worth 40% of the final grade. More information will be available in a separate handout.

**Students with disabilities** must register with the Center on Disabilities and complete a service agreement each semester. Staff within the Center will verify the existence of a disability based on the documentation provided and approve accommodations. Students with disabilities needing classroom accommodations must inform me early in the semester. I will make every effort to accommodate disabled students as far as is possible. Students who are approved for testing taking accommodations must provide me with a proctor form signed by a counselor in the Center on Disabilities prior to making testing arrangements. The Center on Disabilities is located in Bayramian Hall, room 110. Staff can be reached at (818) 677-2684.

**Plagiarism and cheating** are serious academic offenses. Plagiarism involves copying material from sources without giving a full bibliographic citation, handing in work in which unacknowledged material appears, and handing in material written by a person other than the student handing in the assignment. Cheating includes copying from another student's test or paper, allowing another student to copy your work, and the use during a test of study aids not permitted by the instructor. Students caught cheating or plagiarizing will automatically receive a zero for the work in question. Depending on the assignment, this may result in failing the course. Penalties for plagiarism range from failing the course to expulsion. All plagiarism will be reported to the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. You are encouraged to familiarize yourself with the university's full policy on academic dishonesty in the CSUN Catalog and the Student Handbook.

**IV. Evaluation Breakdown:**

Class participation and attendance.....	20 points
Midterm.....	50 points
Final.....	50 points
Final paper/project.....	100 points, broken down as follows:
Proposal.....	10 points
Outline.....	5 points
Completed project.....	85 points
<b>Total = 220 points</b>	

**V. Grading Scale**

205-220 = A    183-193 = B    160-171 = C    138-148 = D  
 198-204 = A-    176-182 = B-    154-159 = C-    131-135 = D-  
 194-197 = B+    172-175 = C+    149-153 = D+    130 and below = F

Please note that graduate students taking this class for credit will be held to a higher standard in exams, papers and presentations than undergraduates. A grade of C or below constitutes failure for graduate students.

**III. Week-by-Week Syllabus**

<u>Day</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Readings</u>
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**Part I: The Anthropology of “Supernatural” Experience**

8/23	Definitions, Issues, Concepts Read: “Do You Believe in Magic?” on Moodle	
8/30	The Phenomenology of the Supernatural Read: Hufford, “Beings Without Bodies;” Motz, “The Practice of Belief,” on Moodle and E-reserve	
<b>9/6</b>	<b>Labor Day; no class!</b>	
9/13	Magic and the Participatory Worldview Read: Greenwood, Sections One and Two	
9/20	Magic, Science and Everyday Life Read: Greenwood, Sections Three and Four	
9/27	The Return of the Dead: Ghosts, Hauntings and Spirits Read: Ellis, “Visits to Forbidden Graveyards” and “The @#\$%& Ouija Board;”	

McClenon, "Haunting and Poltergeist Cases," on Moodle  
**Paper proposals due!**

10/4 Super-Natural: Fairies, Space Aliens, and Abduction Experiences  
Read: Bullard, "UFO Abduction Reports;" Rojcewicz, "Fairies, UFOs and Problems of Knowledge;" Munro, "The Invisible Made Visible;" Eberly, "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability," on Moodle

10/11 **Midterm Exam!**

## **Part II: Alternate Ways of Knowing and Religious Experience**

10/18 The Afro-Caribbean Religious Experience: Vodou  
Read: Brown, *Mama Lola*, Chapters 1-6

10/25 Trance, Possession and Trans-Personal Experience in Vodou  
Read: Brown, *Mama Lola*, Chapters 7-12  
Film: *Divine Horsemen*

11/1 Possessed by the Holy Ghost: Pentecostal Religions  
Read: Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, Chapters 1-6  
Film: *The Holy Ghost People*  
**Paper Outlines Due!**

11/8 The Search for the Numinous in Modern Religious Experience  
Read: Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, Chapters 7-11

## **Part III: The Post-Modern World: Postcoloniality and Reclamation**

11/15 Re-enchanting the World: Contemporary Paganism  
Read: Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, Introduction, Chapters 1-3

11/22 Neo-Paganism, Religion and Identity  
Read: Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, Chapters 4-7  
Film: *Beltane in Berkeley*

11/29 Review and catch-up

12/4 **Class presentations/ Final projects due!**

**12/13 Final Exam, 8:00 – 10:00 PM Final Exam!**