

Cross-cultural Perspectives on Death, Dying, and Bereavement

ANTH 3000 (4 credits)

IHP Death & Dying: Perspectives, Practices & Policies

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

Although death is universal, there is no universal approach to death and dying. This course explores death, dying, and bereavement from the perspective of comparative cultural anthropology with an emphasis on funerary rites and practices. The course will broadly survey death and dying from different regional and cultural contexts accompanied by in depth exploration of the attitudes, symbols, and practices of the host locations. Course content will also delve into death-related superstitions and alternate discourses. Topics will include the role of religion, philosophy, indigenous knowledge, and historical events in determining the meaning of death. Through the process of learning anthropological perspectives in the context of death practices, the course will clarify how explorations of the unfamiliar may operate as a reflexive tool to show that a person's own culture or worldview is one among many, rather than a norm through which difference is understood.

Guiding questions:

- What can we learn about culture through the study of death?
- How do death rites and practices contribute to creating and sustaining a cultural identity?
- How do different cultures define the line between life and death?
- What constitutes a good death?

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Compare diverse cultural perspectives on death, dying, and grieving, including rituals, beliefs, and practices surrounding death in different contexts.
- Delineate the evolution of death practices within specific cultures, tracing how societal changes and historical events influence cultural attitudes towards death.
- Analyze how communities respond to death in the formation of support networks, memorialization practices, and community rituals that emerge in response to loss.
- Examine the impact of globalization on traditional death practices, considering how cultural exchange, migration, and technology contribute to the evolution of cultural attitudes towards death.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English, but students will be exposed to vocabulary related to course content through in-country expert lectures and field visits in a wide range of venues and regional locales.

Instructional Methods

SIT's philosophy of education is rooted in the experiential learning model, which drives the design of this class. Each module allows for experience, reflection, and application. Experiences range from critical analyses to student-led discussion circles that are framed by readings, multimedia texts, lectures, and discussions. Reflection occurs throughout the learning process in various forms, such as formal written assignments and reflexive components in papers/projects. Through reflection, students are encouraged to become aware of their process of learning, to make sense of their experiences, and connect the learning acquired on the program with previous experiences and information. Application activities reinforce learning by practicing communication skills, experimenting with theories, and preparing to transfer learning to future contexts.

Required Texts

Articles on Course Reserve

Assignments

Discussion Circle 5%

Think Like an Anthropologist Essays 40% (4 @ 10%)

Photo Essays 45% (3 @ 15%)

Attendance & Participation (10%)

Discussion Circle: Student groups will lead class discussion of the assigned materials. These discussions provide an opportunity for students to voice their responses to the texts, make connections to anthropological concepts, and synthesize learning from multiple sources.

Think Like an Anthropologist Essay: In these 500-600 word essays, students will respond to the prompt provided by the local faculty. Responses should be focused, insightful, and analytical.

Photo Essay: This assignment aims to blend the visual medium of photography with the ethnographic lens of cultural anthropology. Students will create a series of photo essays that explore aspects of death-related culture, identity, or community practices within each location. Each photo essay should include 10-12 pictures with a caption/cutline. The curation of images, sequence, and text are all important aspects of the project. When taking photos, students need to respect ethical considerations and obtain any necessary permissions. Captions should communicate the significance of the scenes captured and contextualize them within the broader cultural framework. Include a brief introduction (250-400 words) to explain how you approached the subject .

Attendance and Participation: Due to the nature of this experiential program, full participation in all classes and program activities is required. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the program director or other designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, which may impact grades. Excessive, unexcused absences could result in program dismissal. Alternative work for absences will be expected.

Note on Late Assignments: IHP programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program. Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis with approval from the Program Director. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. Students who do not submit their work within the extension period will receive a failing grade.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+
64-66%	D
below 64	F

Program Expectations

In order to make the most of the opportunities presented in program, communicate respectfully, prepare for student success, and demonstrate best possible engagement, SIT has the following expectations of students:

- **Content Considerations:** The texts and activities you will encounter in this course delve into sensitive topics that may be emotionally and intellectually challenging. Our classroom is a space where we can engage with challenging ideas, question assumptions, and navigate difficult topics with respect and maturity. As possible, I will flag content and activities that are especially graphic or intense, so we are prepared to address them soberly and sensitively. If you are struggling to keep up with the work or participate in the course because of the nature of the content and activities, you should speak with me and/or seek help from counseling services.
- **Learning Community:** Respect differences of opinion (classmates', lecturers, local constituents engaged with on the visits). You are not expected to agree with everything you hear, but you are expected to listen across differences and consider other perspectives with respect.
- **Presence.** Show up prepared. Be on time, have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Complying with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone.
- **Engage.** Ask questions in class. Interact with the lecturer. These are often very busy professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak.
- **Be Honest.** Comply with academic integrity policies (no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).
- **Store Your Work:** Keep several copies of your work as back up and keep one copy accessible to you through an online forum, such as an attachment in your email, the course learning management system, or cloud-based storage. This way your work will always be available despite technical issues. Lost files, deleted drives, or computer crashes are not excuses for late, missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable. You may be marked as absent for habitually using them for something other than classroom activities.
- **Course Communication:** Course documents and assignments will be posted on the learning management system, Canvas. Although the course calendar provides a broad overview and the general sequence of work and assignments for the course, what we accomplish in class will vary, and revisions to the calendar will be posted at the course site. You will need to check the course site regularly. You are responsible for letting me know about any network-related problems that prevent you from accessing or submitting assignments.
- **Recording Policy:** To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the

instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the Policies section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Disability Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Note: This is a suggested sequence of modules and topics. Faculty should appropriately adapt how these topics are taught and select local texts, case studies, guest speakers, and site visits that are relevant to the context and CGI. This course framework is designed to be adaptable to local context.

MODULE #1: NEW YORK, NY

Session 1: Cultural Anthropology in New York City

- Key concepts and frameworks: culture, holism, cultural relativism, ethnocentrism
- Death and the City: 40 Years of Death. AIDS, substance abuse, 9/11 attacks, COVID-19

Required Texts:

- Proctor, D. (2022). What is cultural anthropology? <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/what-is-cultural-anthropology/>
- Mckinson, K. D. (2022). (Re)writing anthropology and raising our voices from the academic margins. *Cultural Anthropology*, 37(3), 379–386. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.14506/ca37.3.01>
- Dugger, C.W. (1997). In Mourning, Traditions Mingle; Cultural Exchange in the 'Neighborhoods of the Dead' New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/28/nyregion/in-mourning-traditions-mingle-cultural-exchange-in-the-neighborhoods-of-the-dead.html>

Session 2: Death, American Style

Discussion Circle #1: US Death Culture

- Death at a Distance: contemporary US approaches to death & dying: commercialization, sanitation, and depersonalization
- Death in Public View: cemeteries and memorials

Required Texts:

- Doughty, C. (2017). Introduction. *From here to eternity: Traveling the world to find the good death*.

- Acheson, G., McWhorter, C. (2020). Reading the American cemetery. In: Brunn, S., Kehrein, R. (eds) *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02438-3_159

Learning on Location:

- Brooklyn: A Walk among the Tombstones: Tour [Green-Wood Cemetery](#) with [Boroughs of the Dead](#).

Session 3: Death and Belief

Discussion Topics:

- Religion and the meaning of death
- Religious belief and death anxiety and acceptance

Required Texts:

- Pew Research Center, Nov. 23, 2021, Few americans blame God or say faith has been shaken amid pandemic, other tragedies”
- Sawyer, J. S., Brewster, M. E., & Ertl, M. M. (2021). Death anxiety and death acceptance in atheists and other nonbelievers. *Death Studies*, 45(6), 459–468. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2019.1648339>

Learning on Location

- **Moderated Panel Discussion:** Interfaith panel of religious leaders on the meaning of death in their faith traditions, how the tenets of their faith traditions are manifested in death rites and practices, what constitutes a good death, how they view their role in supporting members of their community/congregation who are dying or bereaved, how death influences or intersects with their social justice programming and advocacy.

Assignment:

- Think Like... Essay #1: Culture. [sample question for local faculty: Reflect on how your cultural background has shaped your understanding and perceptions of death. How do cultural beliefs, rituals, and traditions influence the way death is perceived and experienced within your community?]

MODULE #2: GHANA

Session 4: Death Cultures of Ghana Part 1

Discussion Circle #2

- Akan culture and death practices
- Ga culture and death practices

Required Texts:

- Adjei, S. B., Adinkrah, M., & Mpiani, A. (2023). Gendered mourning: A perspective of Akan death culture in Ghana. *Death Studies*, 1–11. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2023.22>
- Adinkrah, M. (2022). “If you die a bad death, we give you a bad burial:” Mortuary practices and “bad death” among the Akan in Ghana. *Death Studies*, 46(3), 695–707. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2020.1762264>

- Boateng, A. (2012). Socio-economic transformation of Akan funeral rites in Ghana: The changing process. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 65(4), 281–297. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.2190/OM.65.4.c>
- Potocnik, M., & Adum-Kyeremeh, K. (2022). Transformation of Ga death and funeral rites in Accra, Ghana. *Africa Today* 68(3), 89-106. <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.68.3.05>.

Learning on Location

- Accra Site Visit: fantasy-coffin makers workshop

Session 5: Death Cultures of Ghana Part 2

Discussion Topics:

- Dagara culture and death practices
- Ewe culture and death practices

Required Texts:

- Dankwa, J. W. (2021). Sounding the woods: the significance of gyil music in Dagara funeral ceremonies. *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa*, 18(1), 59–76. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.2989/18121004.2021.2013003>
- Burns, J. (2012). Cooling the road: the role of music within the southern Ewe funeral ceremony. *Mortality*, 17(2), 158–169. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/13576275.2012.675235>

Learning on Location

- Choir practice: learning to sing funeral songs

Session 6: Historical Events and Contemporary Culture

Discussion Topics: Colonialism, Transatlantic Slavery, Diaspora

Required Texts:

- Balakrishnan, S. (2022). Building the ancestral public: Cemeteries and the necropolitics of property in Colonial Ghana. *Journal of Social History*, 56(1), 89–113. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1093/jsh/shac010>
- Akom Ankobrey, G., Mazzucato, V., & Wagner, L. B. (2020). “Why are you not crying?": Understanding young people’s transnational engagements through funeral visits to Ghana. *African Diaspora: Transnational Journal of Culture, Economy & Society*, 13(1/2), 93–118. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1163/18725465-bja10015>

Learning on Location:

- Excursion: 3-4 day Elmina and Cape Coast

Assignments:

- Think Like... Essay #2: Cultural Histories and Legacies. [sample question for local faculty: How do the historical traumas that have marked Ghana informed contemporary approaches to death and dying?]
- Photo Essay: Ghana

MODULE #3: INDONESIA

Session 7: Death Cultures of Indonesia Part 1

Discussion Circle #3:

- Bali: Balinese Hindu culture and death practices
- Bali: Trunyan culture and death practices

Required Texts:

- McDaniel, J. (2020). Mysticism among the Pedandas of Bali. *Religions*, 11(11), 585. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.3390/rel11110585>
- Video: Ngaben: Emotion and Restraint in a Balinese Heart. (2019). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sesmyp3ZVAo&ab_channel=ElementalProductions
- The Bali Times. (2015). Mepasah, Funeral Tradition of Trunyan Village. <https://www.thebali-times.com/travel-culture/mepasah-funeral-tradition-of-trunyan-village/>

Learning on Location

- Guest Speaker: local Pedanda (Balinese Hindu High Priest)

Session 8: Death Cultures of Indonesia Part 2

- Aceh culture and death practices
- Nias culture and death practices
- Ngada culture and death practices

Required Texts

- Manan, A., & Arifin, M. (2019). Cultural traditions in death rituals within the community of Pidie, Aceh, Indonesia. *Miqot: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman*, 43(1), 130-144.
- Zaluchu, S. E. (2023). Interpretation about death rite of the Nias Ethnic and its relation to social order. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 1. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1177/00302228221149804>
- Schröter, S. (1998). Death rituals of the Ngada in Central Flores, Indonesia. *Anthropos*, 93(4/6), 417–435. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40464841>

Assignment:

- Think Like... Essay #3: Cultural Relativism. [sample question for local faculty: Consider the encounters you've had with diverse cultural practices related to death in Indonesia. How did these experiences challenge or broaden your understanding of death and mourning?]

Session 9: Death Cultures of Indonesia Part 3, Toraja and the intersection between life and death

This session takes place in Toraja, Sulawesi, one of Indonesia's largest islands. Toraja people perpetuate an elaborate death ritual which constitutes keeping the dead body of a relative at home for weeks or months, and treating them as if they were still living.

Required Texts:

- Tsintjilonis, D. (2000). Death and the sacrifice of signs: "Measuring" the dead in Tana Toraja. *Oceania*, 71(1), 1. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1002/j.1834-4461.2000.tb02720>.
- Video: National Geographic. (2017). Here, Living With Dead Bodies for Weeks—Or Years—Is Tradition. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCKDsJLt_qU&ab_channel=NationalGeographic

Learning on Location

- Excursion: 4 day excursion to Sulawesi

Assignment:

- Photo Essay: Indonesia

MODULE #4: MEXICO

Session 10: Day of the Dead

Discussion Topics: origins, evolution, and local practices

Required Texts:

- Norget, K. (2006). *Days of death, days of life : Ritual in the popular culture of Oaxaca*. Columbia University Press.
 - Chapter 3: Living with Death
 - Chapter 6: Spectacular Death and Cultural Change

Learning on Location

- Day of the Dead celebrations and observations (fall semester)
- Day of the Dead throughout the year (spring semester)

Session 11: The Dead Every Day

Discussion Circle #4

- Santa Muerte

Required Texts:

- Gómes-Cásseres, P.G. (2021). La muerte/ Death, Then & Now. in Debra D. Andrist. *Death & dying in hispanic worlds : The nexus of religions, cultural traditions, and the arts*. Liverpool University Press.
- Kingsbury, K., Chesnut, R. A., & Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, M. (2021). Syncretic Santa Muerte: Holy Death and Religious Bricolage. *Religions*, 12(3), 220. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.3390/rel12030220>

Assignment:

- Think Like.... Essay #4: Globalization: [sample question for local faculty: How have cultural traditions surrounding death been influenced by global trends, and what implications does this have for preserving cultural identity?]

Learning on Location

- Guest Speaker: indigenous and mestizo perspectives on death

Module 12: Death and Popular Culture in Mexico

This session examines the representation of death in Mexican popular culture. Visits to museums such as the Museo del Objeto del Objeto (MODO) help the student develop insights into the aesthetic representation of death in Mexican arts and popular culture. In Guanajuato, we will have the opportunity to visit El Museo de las Momias.

Required Texts:

- Barger, J. (2022). These Mexican mummies draw crowds—and controversy. *National Geographic*. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/these-mexican-mummies-draw-crowds-and-controversy>
- Alberti, S. J. M. M., Bienkowski, P., Chapman, M. J., & Drew, R. (2009). Should we display the dead? *Museum & Society*, 7(3), 133–149.

Learning on Location

- 5-day excursion to Mexico City and Guanajuato
- Museum visits and guest speakers

Assignment

- Photo Essay: Mexico