

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. “Culture”, in this course, is conceptualized as a “guiding way” of different communities that helps to adapt and undertake events of the world around them. The course will broadly survey death cultures from different regional contexts accompanied by in depth exploration of the attitudes, symbols, arts, and performances 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. Student will also examine what it means to be a traveler into the death spaces of others. 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 worldview is one among many, rather than the norm.

Guiding questions:

- How do the various strands of personhood, belief, and materiality factor into the practices of death?
- How does a performance crystalize and generate the values of a culture? What do we learn about communities from understanding their performances?
- How do cultures change through time, and how does death practice reflect or drive these changes?
- How do death practices contribute to creating and sustaining personal, community, and cultural identities?
- What “fogs the vision” for how we approach death in other cultures? How do we set the terms for more faithful engagements?
- How does death and death rite situate itself within a culture?

Learning Outcomes

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

- Compare diverse cultural perspectives, performances, and beliefs about death in different contexts
- Delineate the continuities and inventions of tradition within specific communities, tracing how agency, social change, globalization, or historical events may influence the production of culture.
- Analyze cultures respond to death through support networks, social memory, and community-building rituals
- Examine the ethics of dark tourism and develop codes for cross-cultural engagement

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

Visit Prep (Questions) (30%)

Photo-Essay (60%)

Attendance & Participation (10%)

Visit Prep (Questions): The skill of asking questions is among the most important cross-cultural traveler skills – asking a good question (rather than making a good conclusion) can be just as much of a goal as it is a starting point for cross-cultural engagements. Questions often take building and readjustment in the relationships between communities.

This assignment prepares students for a more self-directed engagement with site visits and guest speakers and helps instructors gauge each student's interests. Students will examine the country schedule and each CUL "session" on this syllabus or calendar. Reviewing the site visits and guest speakers, students will provide a list of 2 questions for the topics of each

session (6 questions in total for each country). Students do not have to ask these questions at the site visit or guest speaker specifically, but the assignment will help students to both arrive prepared and observe when their questions may change. Students will draw on these questions to think through the theme of their Photo Essay assignments.

Students will prepare 6 questions for Ghana, Mexico, and Indonesia each (30% (3 x 10%)). Students will upload these questions onto Canvas at arrival in each host country.

Note: site visits and guest speakers are subject to changing availability and conditions, so it possible that not all experiential learning opportunities will occur.

Photo Essay: This contextualization assignment aims to immerse students within their host communities through guided exploration, photography, curation, and reflection. For this assignment, students will take photos throughout each host country and think through how their photos connect to their prep questions. Students do not need to answer each question with a photo, but think through a running theme or interest behind their questions and how it is captured in their photos and experiences (or how they diverge). The curation of images, sequence, and text are all important aspects of the project and understanding how one is engaging with their host community – particularly in how our host communities connects to our curiosities and interests. When taking photos, students need to respect ethical considerations and obtain any necessary permissions. (4 @ 15%)

- **10-12 photos with captions** to communicate the significance of the scenes captured to your central theme
- **250-400 word introduction** to explain the running theme or interest behind your prep questions, how the photos you took capture your experience, and how these connects to, answers, or departs from the questions you originally had when you arrived in each country

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](#), [Accessibility 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.

Readings Key:

Required Text – This reading will be part of a class discussion where students are expected to contribute

Recommended Text – This reading reinforces and clarifies a site visit or guest lecture

Further Reading – This reading expands on topics that may relate to individual student interests

Reference – This reading is a classic work or database whose content may be referenced in class

MODULE #1: NEW YORK, NY

Session 1: Performances of Culture

What is the place of a performance in different communities? Performances are very often transformative rather than merely expressive acts. Performances are also crystallizations of a culture where codes, values, and worldviews are brought out on stage to observe and open for negotiation. This orientation class will embark students on the exploration of performances and their generative role in different cultures.

Recommended Text:

- Schiffman, J. (2022). How do actors play dead? *Backstage.com*. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/shuffling-mortal-coil-63936/#:~:text=On%20stage%2C%20death%20must%20be,leaving%20us%2C%22%20he%20says>
- Lueger, M. (2016). Stage death: From offstage to in your face. *JSTOR Daily* <https://daily.jstor.org/stage-death-from-offstage-to-in-your-face/>

Reference:

- Victor Turner (1967). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Selections)
- Erving Goffman (1959). *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Selections)
- Lucie, S., & Schechner, R. (2020). *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. (Selections)
- Conquergood, D. (2013). *Cultural struggles: Performance, ethnography, praxis*. University of Michigan Press. (Selections)

Learning on Location:

- Hadestown
- Guest Speaker – how actors stage death by Nina Goodheart

Session 2: Materiality, Performance, and Experience-as-a-Concept

How can we understanding the “meaning” of things and actions we encounter? Does every action or object function only as a symbol of an unseen belief, or how can we understand religious lifeways where belief was never that important? This orientation class prepares students to engage other forms of meaning making – particularly through the role of the experiential – to understand how the material repertoire of our host communities function. For many communities, the world is not an inert place, and instead full of objects, actions, and

places of “power”, often created through their experiences. Throughout their time in IHP Death and Dying, students will visit many locations, all of which will take on their own meanings through the students’ experiences, and this class will prepare students to think not only about the “hows” “whys” and “whats” of the meanings they make, but those of our host communities. This interrogation of belief and experience also provides the first route into looking at religious syncretism, which will become a running theme in cross-cultural death studies.

Required:

- Basso, K. H. (1996). *Wisdom sits in places: Landscape and language among the Western Apache*. UNM Press. (Selections)
- Seeman, E. R. (2011). Prologue: Encounters with bones and death (pp. 1-6). From *The Huron-Wendat feast of the dead: Indian-European encounters in early North America*.

Reference:

- Bell, C. (1991). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. Oxford university press. (Selections)

Session 3: Materiality, Art, and Spirituality in European History

Like the changing history of death, European history demonstrates a changing history of spirituality rather than fixed ways of religion. Medieval art is a vehicle through which divinity was transferred into the world, before a more monastic understanding spirituality as withdrawal took hold, and then eventually shifted again to later understandings as religion as humanistic with a stronger presence of divinity in human and natural life. This same trajectory mirrors major transformations in the history of death denial and rise of death positivity movements. This session will explore the changing notion of spirituality through art and interrogate its relationship to changing depictions of religious death.

Learning on Location:

- Met Cloisters

Further Readings:

- Staudt, C. (2017). Death in Western art and literature. In *The Routledge Companion to Death and Dying* (pp. 558-570). Routledge.

Reference:

- Barnet, P., & Wu, N. Y. (2012). *The Cloisters: Medieval art and architecture* (75th Anniv. ed., rev. & expanded). The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press.

MODULE #2: GHANA

Session 4: Materiality and Art of Death in Ghana

Art and material culture in Ghana is defined by its creativity and futurism. Ghana prides itself as a center of pan-Africanist thought and espouses a cosmopolitan ethic. These values manifest in visual and material expressions such as in the Afro-chic movements, in highlife and hiplife music, and social-moral philosophies made into sculpture or coffin – all of which also traverse barriers into the social life of death. Much of this modernity is rooted in pan-Africanist optimisms arising from the guiding way voiced by Kwame Nkrumah, which breaks down incommensurabilities imagined and frozen into place by colonialism, and looks to tradition and community life to define the humanism of African (and global) citizenships.

Learning on Location:

- Funeral Music Troup
- Manhia Palace – Asante Art and History
- Death and Hip-Hop

Session 5: Religious Syncretism, Colonialism, and African Communities

How does religion and community come together? How can institutional religions such as Christianity and Islam come to be compatible with African traditions? This session interrogates this question of how religious lives fit together and how African agencies reconfigure them. Central to this idea is understanding the importance of community life and its social and moral philosophies. This community life is often driven by the role of ancestors and elders, some of whom many continue to guide the living long after their departure.

Learning on Location:

- Guest Speaker Kobby Graham
- Guest Speaker on the Political and Ethnic History of Ghana

Required Texts (by Kobby Graham):

- Hood, R. E. (1990). *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro Cultures and God-Talk*. Fortress Press. (Selections)
- Graham, K (2014): 'Christ vs. Nkrumah' (<https://kobbygraham.com/2014/06/22/christ-vs-nkrumah/>)

Recommended Texts:

- Appiah, KA (2014) 'Is Religion Good or Bad?' (TED Talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/kwame_anthony_appiah_is_religion_good_or_bad_this_is_a_trick_question)
- Documentary: Bigger Than Africa (Adekeyi, 2018 – available on Netflix)
- Oden, Thomas C. *How Africa shaped the Christian mind: Rediscovering the African seedbed of western Christianity*. InterVarsity Press, 2010. (Selections)

Reference:

- Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions & philosophy*. Heinemann. (Selections)
- Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988). *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*. Indiana University Press.
- Nkrumah, K. (1970). *Consciencism: Philosophy and ideology for de-colonisation*. Panaf Books.
- Kopytoff, I. (1971). *Ancestors as elders in Africa*. *Africa*, 41(2), 129–142.

Session 6: Heritage Tourism and Dark Tourism

Tourists regularly visit sites where human pain, death, and atrocity occurred just as much as they do to cultural heritage sites for the purposes of remembrance, education, and reflection – but how do we wrestle with the experiences of these sites and what better defines their ethical engagement? How does dark tourism differ from heritage tourism? Very often, how the site is presented, visitor behavior, and the purpose of the visit are important factors in thinking about how tourism operates in these spaces. This session will interrogate some of the features students have encountered on their trips to Kumasi and Cape Coast to interrogate the position of a travelers to a region.

Learning on Location:

- Discussion Circle: Cape Coast castle, Elmina castle, and Assin Manso
- Discussion Circle: Kumasi and Accra site visits

Recommended Texts:

- Mowatt, R. A., & Chancellor, C. H. (2011). Visiting death and life: Dark tourism and slave castles. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(4), 1410–1434. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1016/j.annals.2011.03.012>

Reference:

- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1998). *Destination culture: Tourism, museums, and heritage*. Univ of California Press.

MODULE #3: MEXICO

Session 7: Materiality and Art of Death in Mexico

In Mexico, act of crafting something is a coding for the reproduction of indigenous knowledges, so that making chocolate or *chichilo* can capture aspects of death rite, and molding pottery reenacts myths of creation and regeneration of life. Both food and ceramics are often found in ancestral tombs. The diffusion of knowledge into Mexican cultural rites has been locally considered a resistance strategy that has aided people through history. What an outsider may see as unrelated practices are instead secret ways of communicating. These strategies helped prevent the guiding way of Mexican communities from ever diminishing and instead strengthen its presence more consciously in people's material and actions. Students will explore the secret languages coded in the material culture in Mexican communities to better understand why these become valued elements of heritage.

Note:

Fall students will observe the Day of the Dead in Oaxaca

Spring students travel to Mexico City and Oaxacan autonomous communities

Recommended:

- Dreiss, M. L., & Greenhill, S. E. (2008). *Chocolate: Pathway to the gods*. University of Arizona Press. (Chapter 1).
- Lomnitz. (2005). *Death and the idea of Mexico*. Zone Books. (Chapter 1).

Reference:

- Hockey, J. (1996). The view from the west: reading the anthropology of non-western death ritual. In *Contemporary issues in the sociology of death, dying and disposal* (pp. 3-16). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Walter, T. (1994-1995). Natural Death and the Noble Savage. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 30(4), 237–248

Learning on Location:

- Chocolate Workshop
- Cochillo Workshop (Fall)

- Ceramics Workshop (Spring)
- Museo de Anthropology (Spring)

Session 8: Philosophy of the Comunalidad

Autonomous communities like Guelatao prize counter-hierarchical social structure. This arc will dive into the indigenous and resistance philosophies that underpin the “comunalidad” concept. Comunalidad is a way of life rooted in collective decision-making, cultural preservation, and resistance to assimilation. Jaime Martinez Luna first defined comunalidad as “one’s own right, one’s own culture, naturolatry, resistance, adaptation, communalicracy, and own technology”—a holistic framework grounded in the community’s autonomous governance through community assemblies (*asambleas comunitarias*), communal labor (*the tequio*), and free office (*sistema de cargos gratuitos*). Students will learn about the lifeways and deathways within the comunalidad as a paramount site of indigenous leadership.

Recommended Texts:

- Esteva y Guerrero (2011) “Guelaguetza and Tu Chha’ia: A Zapotec perspective of what Others call friendship” *The Palgrave International Handbook of Peace Studies. A Cultural Perspective*. 352-372
- Scott, J. (1990) “Elaborate forms of disguise: A collective representation of culture.” *Domination and the arts of resistance*. 156-160
- Illich, I. (1987). A plea for research on lay literacy. *Interchange*, 18(1), 9-22.

Learning on Location

- Guest speaker Jaime Luna – Philosophy of Comunalidad
- Gustavo – Modes of communication and being in Guelatao
- Nadia – Gendered roles and personhoods in Guelatao

Session 9 (FALL): Day of the Dead

Day of the Dead is among the most famous death celebrations in the world and entwined with Mexican national character, but where do they come from? Strands of pre-Columbian rites are found in basic elements preserved in the days of the dead – including the offerendas, representational funerary objects, marigolds, sugar skulls, feasts of the dead, and more. Making use of Christian holidays, these rites helped hide the culture and transport it into the present. However, they also become more popular after the Mexican revolution and its impact on the art and poetic movements that began praising a flirtatious relationship with death. Today again, inventions of tradition are at work, with Mexico City’s new Day of the Dead parade being inspired by James Bond films. This session will examine the Day of the Dead in both the city and indigenous autonomous community as we trace its complex origins, celebrations, and importance to Mexican identity today.

Required Texts:

- Brandes, S. (1997). Sugar, colonialism, and death: on the origins of Mexico's Day of the Dead. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 39(2), 270-299.

Recommended 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:

- Altar-making convivio
- Day of the Dead in Oaxaca City
- Day of the Dead in Guelatao

Session 9 (SPRING): Religious Syncretism in Mexico

What happens when religions encounter each other? History is imagined – including its victories and losses – yet it still sets the tone for our realities today. While someone may portray histories of colonial occupation without a sense of indigenous agencies, those agencies molded how aspects of religion would form in Mexico. This class explores again the question of syncretism. Is incommensurability a norm, and how are religious differences managed? Can we see something as religion that another person sees as social, cultural, practical, or another form apart? Students will examine alternate forms of Christianity and compare the material rhymes of Oaxaca to their early encounters with Christian art in New York.

Learning on Location:

- Observance of Samaritana in Oaxaca
- Observance of Passione de Cristo in Xoxo
- Observance of the Capture of the Centurion in San Juan
- Coming together of communities at Guelatao

MODULE #3: INDONESIA

Session 10: Materiality and Art of Death in Indonesia

Balinese and Indonesian cultures do not often separate religion and art. Art may be produced as an outcome of social and religious obligation, rather than individual expression. Art is also not always intended to be viewed as through a frame and instead functions as more akin to the equipment by which cultures and communities operate. Balinese art may be more strongly

embedded in ritual, performance, temple architecture, or capture elements of cosmology. Art in Indonesia is also a site of innovation – despite tourist perceptions that reject cultural creativity and instead seek the “authentic”, freezing the guiding way as a stagnant artifact of time.

Learning on Location

- Topande – Death Sculpture maker
- Balinese Art with Yudi

Session 11: Balinese Hinduism

Balinese Hinduism is one of many religious traditions throughout Indonesia that takes on its own unique form from a syncretic history. Balinese Hinduism is anchored around three causes of wellbeing: Parahyangan or harmony with the divine, pawongan or harmony among people, and palemahan or harmony with nature and the environment. These values and their supporting cultural strands manifest throughout Bali so that Balinese Hinduism is not only a religion, but a total cultural system. These worldviews impact Balinese deathways, as a healthy deathway produces an ancestor and, possibly, a deity.

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

Learning on Location

- Guest Speaker: local Pedanda (Balinese Hindu High Priest)
- Tanah Lot Temple
- Tirta Empul

Session 12: The Life-cycle of Tana Toraja

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. These rites-of-death are interconnected with rites-of-life, mostly prominently embodied in the Toraja House. The construction of a Toraja House is another site where a people’s guiding way is crystallized and a momentous event. Within the landscape and popularity of the Toraja famous for its death culture – the rites of life are actually considered far more special, rare, and worthy of even greater elaboration.

Required Texts:

- Selections from *Life and Death: The Lost Culture*

Learning on Location

- Excursion: 4-day excursion to Sulawesi

Learning on Location:

- Tana Toraja – Kauraya
- Tana Toraja – Kete Kesu