

ANTHROPOLOGY 385 R

The Anthropology of Death and Burial

SUMMARY:

How do people handle death? Through the different perspectives provided by anthropology, medicine, sociology, history, law and ritual studies, this course explores the dual aspect of death, as a cultural *and* biological phenomenon, across cultures and through time. The themes discussed in the class range from contemporary definitions of death and the culturally framed experiences of grief and loss to the diverse ways in which we handle death through ritual, and what happens when those rituals fail. We will discuss how people deal with death in extraordinary situations, including natural disasters, war, and epidemics. From the biological perspective, we will discuss both the process of dying and the post-mortem processes of decay and decomposition. A recurrent theme of the course is the point of contact between the natural and the cultural dimensions of death.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- 1) You will learn how to think critically about death, dying and mortuary practices from a bio-cultural perspective which draws on the insights from several disciplines including cultural anthropology, medicine, biology, sociology, history, ritual studies and law. The course will provide you with a background in these perspectives through the material that is introduced in the class. The cross disciplinary approach will be explicit as the material is introduced in a way that combines several disciplines for each theme in the course.
- 2) You will learn how to independently interpret and critically examine cultural expressions relating to the theme of death (for example by analyzing film sequences, by reading descriptions of rituals, by analyzing press coverage of events etc.). You will also learn how to critically examine ethical issues relating to the themes of death, topics that often have an immediate relevance for understanding contemporary society (the definition of death, organ donations, abortion, assisted suicide, ethnic violence, catastrophic death and its consequences).
- 3) You will learn how to communicate your ideas and opinions and express yourself both orally and in writing. Recurrent structured seminars will provide the opportunity for each of you to take on a leadership role in preparing, leading and summing up the seminar. The topics discussed are often sensitive and emotional, and the course will also be a context in which you will learn and practice academic debate in a respectful way. The papers that you will write over the course of the semester will be an opportunity for you to practice your skills of expressing your ideas and argue for their position in writing. Finally, the term paper, which will be in the form of an ethnography, will provide an opportunity for you to learn how to conduct an independent research project, produce original data and reflect over it in an insightful way which draws on the material covered in class.

| THE WRITING RICH COMPONENT:

There are no exams in this class and the assessment will to a very large degree be based on the written assignments including three response papers and one term paper (a total of between 38 and 49 pages over the semester). You will be given detailed feedback that comments on both style and content on your response papers. The learning process is emphasized by the fact that the first response paper counts for 10% of the final grade, while the two following count for 15% each of the final grade.

For the term paper similar extensive feedback will be given on a first draft that allows you to improve the organization of your argument as well as the style of the paper.

Besides the paper writing, you will also be posting comments on your reading every week on a designated Blackboard page. Besides creating a foundation for a seminar discussion, these posts will also be an opportunity for you to formulate your arguments in writing, and learn from each other how to engage in the debate and discussion, and how to formulate ideas and opinions.

WHO COULD/SHOULD TAKE THIS COURSE:

The course is open to students from all different fields. It is probably clear why this course can be very beneficial for students in the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, history) and humanities (religion, history, literature), but I also want to point out that pre-med and pre-nursing students would benefit from it as well. This was pointed out to me when I taught this course on the Atlanta campus and one of my students interviewed nursing school students and nurses for her term paper in this class. They told her that this topic was not explored in depth within their curriculum and they all regretted that and saw a need for this kind of course in their training. Because of how the learning is structured, the course is perhaps especially adapted to our second year students, but I know from experience that also a motivated freshman can do very well in this class, and I do not feel that a restriction is necessary.

THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE CLASS:

The class is explicitly cross-disciplinary and draws on the insights from multiple areas. This is reflected in the class structure which is thematic and systematically combines readings from several disciplines in order to address each theme. The different themes build on each other and provide a gradual increase in the conceptual tools available for the students. The overlap of central themes within the different modules is intentional and will be made explicit in the lectures as well as in the discussions. The class is structured in a way to frontload the most work intensive reading and discussions in order to free up time toward the end of the semester for you to work on your term-papers.

The course is organized in seven cross-disciplinary themes:

THEME 1: THE PROCESS OF DYING

THEME 2: THE HUMAN CADAVER

THEME 3: GRIEF AND MOURNING

THEME 4: RITUALS OF DEATH

THEME 5: CATASTROPHIC DEATH

THEME 6: CHOOSING DEATH: SUICIDE, ASSISTED SUICIDE AND EUTHANASIA

| THEME 7: R.I.P?

ORGANIZATION OF THE TEACHING/LEARNING:

This course is based on a combination of lectures, discussion seminars and three lengthier writing requirements and a term paper (see below). Lectures will introduce the topics of the class on a regular basis, but the participation in the discussions which will be based on required reading, will also constitute an important part of the course.

In order to structure these discussions, and in order to provide everybody with an opportunity to take an active part in the discussions, the discussion seminars will be organized in smaller groups. The groups will remain the same throughout the whole semester. In order to prepare for the discussions, each group will assign one or two (depending on class and group size) discussion leader(s). This role will rotate throughout the semester, so that everybody will have taken on that responsibility at least once. Each student should read the required texts and post comments on Blackboard in advance. The comments should always be reflective but could take on various forms (they could be general reflections, questions or comments). The purpose of the posts is both to provide a base for the discussion leader to structure the seminar and a forum in which the students can feel safe to speculate, test ideas, voice opinions etc. You are encouraged to engage in an on-line discussion by posting comments to one another before class. The role of the discussion leader is to summarize the comments made on line and introduce the different topics or themes for discussion during the duration of the seminar. After the seminar is over, the seminar leader will write up a summary of the discussion and post it on Blackboard.

REQUIRED READING:

There is no course book in this class, and all the required reading will be posted on Blackboard (please see above for details). You are expected to read the articles posted and to comment on them on the Blackboard in order to prepare for the discussion seminars in class. You are also expected to refer to this reading explicitly in discussions as well as in their papers.

REQUIREMENTS:

Grades are based on:

- 3 lengthy response papers (6 – 8 pages) over the course of the semester
- One final Term Paper (20 – 25 pages).
- In addition, in-class participation is crucial, as is contribution to the Blackboard discussion forum.

The requirements will be weighed for the final course grade in the following way:

1 st response paper:	10%
2 nd response paper:	15%
3 rd response paper:	15%
Term Paper:	35%
Comments on Blackboard, Participation and Attendance:	25%

Participation in class (through discussion, questions and seminar leadership) and the comments posted on the blackboard (when applicable) is not only a way to show what they know. *It is, above all, a way to learn.* In this class their active participation is especially important since

discussions (in class and on Blackboard) constitute a significant part of the content of this class. The importance that I place on this is reflected in the fact that it counts for 25% of the grade. Because of this emphasis placed on participation, it is also especially important that we together create an open class-room climate where everybody will feel comfortable to be an active participant and where we can learn from each other. Difference of opinion enriches the class room. I will make it very clear that the students never are graded on their opinion, but on their knowledge and their argumentation.

For the term paper you will do an ethnography, or an in-depth study of a contemporary phenomenon relating to the class, preferably an occupation, business or profession in the Oxford / Atlanta area that deals with death, dying and mortuary practice. Some examples could be:

- Mortuary homes and people working there
- Pet crematories and people working there
- Cemeteries and people working there
- Businesses that provide services (caterers...), coffins and other paraphernalia and people working there
- Medical professionals that work in terminal care or with dying patients
- Psychologists working with grief

The choice of topic will be very open. However, a part of the research should produce new data – for example through interviews or surveys. Examples of topics that were researched when I last taught this course:

- *How world events have shaped the evolution of Islamic burial practices & the perspectives offered by Muslim youth on the future of such funeral rites*
- *Nursing Students and Their Exposure to Dying and Dead Patients*
- *Suicide Funerals: The Tragic Deaths and Rituals Constructed for Them*
- *A Hunger for Something More: Expressions of Vampiric Identity Online*
- *The History of Modern Funeral Practices and the Affects of the Recent Economical Downturn*
- *Death of a stranger (a paper based on interviews with a forensic pathologist)*
- *Desecration of cemeteries. Sociological and cultural reflections.*

In the term paper the students are expected to relate your observations and discussions to the material covered in the class. One important point to reflect over is how the things that we do in our own society in relation to death reflect our cultural values and expectations.

SCHEDULE OF THE CLASS INCLUDING THEMES, READINGS AND DEADLINES:

THURSDAY JAN 13:
INTRODUCTION

THEME 1: THE PROCESS OF DYING

In this section we will start by discussing the medical understanding of death as a biological process. We will review the definitions used to define death within the medical community and highlight their relative nature. The understanding of the lack of a completely objective definition of death in the biological and medical fields brings us to the other and equally important component of this theme which is the cultural and social dimensions of dying. We will discuss how death is always constructed and framed culturally, how the way we deal with it reflects central concerns within different cultures, and how inequality in society often is immediately reflected in both *why* and *how* we die.

TUESDAY JAN 18

LECTURE: THE PROCESS OF DYING – MEDICAL AND BIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

- Leslie IVAN and Maureen MELROSE: excerpts from: *The Way We Die*. Brain Death, vegetative state, euthanasia and other end of life dilemmas. Pari Publishing 2007.
- Chapter 1: On the road to the concept of brain death
- Chapter 2: Brain death
- Richard SHEPHERD: *The Medical Aspects of Death*, in Simpson's Forensic Medicine, 12th edition. Arnold. 2003.
- Chapter 5: The Medical Aspect of Death
- World Medical Association Declaration on Death
- Memorandum issued by the honorary secretary of the Conference of Medical Colleges and their Faculties in the United Kingdom on 15 January 1979. *British Medical Journal* 1979. Feb 3: 1(6195): 332
- Uniform Determination of Death Act (USA)
- Eelko WIJDICKS: Brain death worldwide: Accepted facts but no global consensus in diagnostic criteria. *Neurology*, 58 (2002), 20-25

THURSDAY JAN 20
DISCUSSION SEMINAR

TUESDAY JAN 25

LECTURE: THE PROCESS OF DYING – CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

- Margeret LOCK: *Displacing Suffering: The Reconstruction of Death in North America and Japan*, in *Social Suffering* ed. Arthur KLEINMAN, Veena DAS and Margaret LOCK. University of California Press. 1997.
- P. ARIES: *The Tame Death*. In: *The Hour of Our Death*. Random House.
- S. R. KAUFMAN: *Death in Life. The "Person" and the Experience of Dying*. In: *...and a time to die*. The University of Chicago Press.
- M. C. KEARL: *How We Die: The Social Stratification of Death*. In: *Endings. A Sociology of Death and Dying*. Oxford University Press 1989.

THURSDAY JAN 27:
DISCUSSION SEMINAR

THEME 2: THE HUMAN CADAVER

In this theme we will discuss what happens to the human body when the vital functions cease and the processes of decomposition and putrefaction manifest themselves. We will start by addressing these changes from a biological point of view, but the focus will move on to how survivors deal with the emergence of a cadaver in the place of the living being it used to embody. We will discuss aspects such as the liminal character of the dead body (as expressed for example in its legal status), and we will discuss cultural understandings and framings of human cadavers as subjects, objects and / or objects (i.e. a liminal category situated somewhere between the subject and object, *sensu* Kristeva). To connect to coming themes (see below) we will also briefly touch upon the culturally specific often ritualized strategies used to deal with the post mortem processes (embalming, cremation, cryonics, various examples of the display of the processes) as examples of the immediate connection to specific cultural concerns.

Reading and reference materials:

TUESDAY FEB 1:

LECTURE: THE HUMAN CADAVER, WHAT REMAINS

- P. ARIES: The Dead Body. In: the Hour of Our Death. Random House.
- C. J. POLSON, D. J. GEE, B. KNIGHT: The Signs of Death. In: The Essentials of Forensic Medicine, 4th Edition. Pergamon Press 1985.
- Richard SHEPHERD: Changes After Death, in Simpson's Forensic Medicine, 12th edition. Arnold 2003.
- C. KOMAROMY: The sight and sound of death: the management of dead bodies in residential and nursing homes for older people. Mortality vol 5, no 3, 2000.

THURSDAY FEB 3:

DISCUSSION SEMINAR

1ST PAPER DUE ON SAFEASSIGN

TUESDAY FEB 8:

LECTURE: THE HUMAN CADAVER, SUBJECT, OBJECT OR ABJECT

Additional materials used in class:

- This American Life episode 354: Mistakes Were Made: It's the late 1960s, and in the new technology of cryonics, a California TV repairman named Bob sees an opportunity to help people cheat death (<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/354/Mistakes-Were-Made>).
- J. TROYER. Abuse of a corpse: A brief history and re-theorization of necrophilia laws in the USA. Mortality, vol 13, no 2, 2008.
 - J. TROYER. Embalmed vision. Mortality vol 12, no 1, 2007.

THURSDAY FEB 10:

DISCUSSION SEMINAR

THEME 3: GRIEF AND MOURNING

Grief, mourning, bereavement and commemoration are central aspects of how we think about death and burial in our culture. In this part of the class we will discuss to what extent we can assume that these phenomena are cross-cultural universals and to what degree they can be viewed as cultural products.

TUESDAY FEB 15:

LECTURE: GRIEF AND MOURNING

- L. LAYNE: He was a real baby with baby things. A material culture analysis of personhood, parenthood and pregnancy loss. *Journal of Material Culture* vol. 5 no. 3, 2000.
- N. SCHEPER-HUGHES: Culture, Scarcity and Maternal Thinking. Maternal detachment and infant survival in a Brazilian Shantytown. *Ethos*, vol. 13, no 4. 1985.
- T. WALTER: A new model for grief: Bereavement and biography. *Mortality*, vol. 1, no. 1. 1996.
- R. ROSALDO: Grief and a Headhunter's Rage. In: *Culture and Truth: The remaking of Social Analysis*. Beacon Press 1993.

Additional materials used in class:

Excerpts from the movie "Fanny and Alexander" directed by Ingmar Bergman.

THURSDAY FEB 17:

DISCUSSION SEMINAR

DEADLINE FOR PROPOSING A SUBJECT FOR TERMPAPER (INCLUDING A PROPOSAL FOR AN OUTLINE)

THEME 4: RITUALS OF DEATH

In the beginning of this segment we will introduce ritual theory. Why do people use rituals, how do rituals work and how are they articulated to other dimensions of society. Mortuary rituals are then discussed as a rite of passage, and through a variety of case studies we will discuss in what ways mortuary rituals provide a culturally specific structure, often intimately connected to political and social dimensions of society, to handle the emergence of a cadaver and the loss of a human being. Among the examples discussed we will also discuss contemporary American mortuary rituals in order to reflect in what way they provide the structures we so clearly see when studying "the other".

TUESDAY FEB 22:

LECTURE: THE STRUCTURE OF RITUAL AND THE MORTUARY RITUAL AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

- R. HERTZ: A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death, originally published in 1907

THURSDAY FEB 24:

LECTURE AND FILM: DECODING THE QUEEN

- Excerpts from the movie "The Queen" directed by Stephen Frears.

TUESDAY MARCH 1

LECTURE: BURIAL RITUAL AND POWER

- R. HUNTINGTON & P. METCALF: The Immortal Kingship, in: *Celebrations of Death*, Cambridge University Press 1979.
- JACOBSON-WIDDING: Death Rituals as Inversions of Life Structures. A comparison of Swedish and African Funerals. In: S. CEDERROTH et al (eds) *On the Meaning of Death*. Almqvist & Wiksell Intl.

THURSDAY MARCH 3:

DISCUSSION SEMINAR

TUESDAY MARCH 15:

LECTURE: MORTUARY RITUAL AND CULTURE

- L. SUN CROWDER: Chinese Funerals in San Francisco Chinatown: American Chinese Expressions in Mortuary Ritual Performance. *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 113, no. 450, 2000.
- O. NIEUWENHUYES: Amma: funerals as politics among south Indian Ezhavas. *Mortality*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2004.

THURSDAY MARCH 17:
DISCUSSION SEMINAR
2ND PAPER DUE ON SAFEASSIGN

TUESDAY MARCH 22:
LECTURE: OUR MORTUARY RITUALS

- G. LADERMAN: Keeping the Dead in Place. Chapter in: Rest in Peace. A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America. Oxford University Press. 2003.

Additional materials used in class:

- The PBS Frontline documentary "The Undertaking".

Described on the Frontline webpage (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/undertaking/>): "Thomas Lynch, 58, is a writer and a poet. He's also a funeral director in a small town in central Michigan where he and his family have cared for the dead -- and the living -- for three generations. For the first time, Lynch agreed to allow cameras inside Lynch & Sons, giving FRONTLINE producers rare, behind-the-scenes access -- from funeral arrangements to the embalming room."

THURSDAY MARCH 24:
DISCUSSION SEMINAR

THEME 5: CATASTROPHIC DEATH

In this theme we will change perspective radically and start to reflect on what happens to communities when customary rituals become impossible due to extreme circumstances such as mass death and conflict. Through examples like Hurricane Katrina, the genocide in Rwanda, the Holocaust, the calculated risk of the Blitz during WWII and the accidents of the shipwreck of Estonia in 1994, we will discuss the psychological impact of the lack of ritual structure as well as the political and ideological impact of denying people the right to bury their dead. We will also ask ourselves *why* this is so powerful.

TUESDAY MARCH 29
LECTURE: RESPONSE TO CATASTROPHIC DEATH

- Newspaper coverage of Katrina.

- P. GOUREVITCH, Among the Dead. In: Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century.

- P. GOUREVITCH, excerpts from: We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda

- J. RUGG: Managing "Civilian Death Due to War Operations": Yorkshire Experiences During World War II. In: Twentieth Century British History, Vol. 15, No 2. pp: 152-173. 2004.

- E. REIMERS: A reasonable grief - discursive constructions of grief in a public conversation on raising the shipwrecked M/S Estonia. Mortality Vol.8, Vol. 3, pp: 325-341- 2003.

TURSDAY MARCH 31:
DISCUSSION SEMINAR – N B I WILL BE ABSENT
DEADLINE FOR FIRST DRAFTS OF TERM PAPER

THEME 6: CHOOSING DEATH: SUICIDE, ASSISTED SUICIDE AND EUTHANASIA

This section of the class provides the opportunity to discuss why people would chose death – through suicide, assisted suicide, euthanasia etc – and in what way society responds to these acts. Why is suicide provocative? Why is assisted suicide considered so controversial?

TUESDAY APRIL 5:

LECTURE: SUICIDE

- M. R. LEARY et al. 2003: Teasing, Rejection, and Violence: Case Studies of the School Shootings. *Aggressive Behavior*, Vol. 29 , 202-214.
- L. BUTLER, 2002. Suicide Bombers: Dignity, Dispair and the Need for Hope. An interview with Eyad al Sarraj. *The Journal of Palestinian Studies*, Vol 31, No. 4. 71-76.

THURSDAY APRIL 7: DISCUSSION SEMINAR

TUESDAY APRIL 12:

LECTURE: ASSISTED SUICIDE, EUTHANASIA

- J. VARELIUS 2007. Illness, Suffering and Voluntary Euthanasia. *Bioethics*, Vol. 21, No. 2. 75-83.

THURSDAY APRIL 14: DISCUSSION SEMINAR

3RD PAPER DUE ON SAFEASSIGN

THEME 7 R.I.P?

Should we leave the dead in peace? What are the ethical dilemmas with researching human remains in medicine, biology, archaeology, anthropology etc consider omitting etc? Do the gains of research outweigh the ethical considerations? How can we reflect over issues such as informed consent? To what degree can one hurt (disrespect, humiliate etc) the dead?

Reading and reference materials:

TUESDAY APRIL 19:

LECTURE: SHOULD WE LEAVE THE DEAD IN PEACE?

- M. ROACH. 2003. Dead Man Driving. Human crash test dummies and the ghastly, necessary science of impact tolerance. Excerpt from: *Stiff. The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. New York: Norton & Company.

THURSDAY APRIL 21:

DISCUSSION SEMINAR

TUESDAY APRIL 26:

END OF SEMESTER MEETING: TERM PAPERS DUE ON SAFEASSIGN, FINAL DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION