Anthropology 308
The Anthropology of Ritual and Religion

Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University
Instructor: Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi
Class time: Mo/Thu. 9:15-10:35 o’clock.
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Location of course: RAB 208


This course explores the significance of sacrifice as a variation on the theme of
death in ritual, religion, and modern formations such as the nation. In diverse forms such
as ritual exchange, witchcraft, spirit possession, renunciation, and national identification,
sacrifice is either a rhetorical device, or, a deep structure of human symbolic action.
Sacrifice is minimally defined as the constitution of a loss in order to constitute the
sacred of a community. What is the value of sacrifice as an analytical concept? The
course will engage classic formative texts in anthropological theory and investigate three
ethnographic examples in the contemporary world—anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland, anti-
Muslim pogroms in India, and anti-Tutsi genocide in Rwanda--where a sacrificial logic
comes into play, often connected to the search for immortality. In providing an
introduction into ritual technologies, students will also learn to identify and critically
appraise their deployment as rhetoric, metaphor, or logic in quasi-religious contexts.

Books for Purchase

Henri Hubert, and Marcel Mauss. 1964 Sacrifice. It’s Nature and Function. Chicago: The
University of Chicago Press.

Mary Douglas. 1966 Purity and Danger. London: Ark Paperbacks

Cambridge University Press

Movies

Jean Rouch, LES MAITRES FOUS
Pier Paolo Pasolini, MEDEA
Rakesh Sharma, FINAL SOLUTION, selections
Judith Gleason/Elisa Mereghetti, THE KING DOES NOT LIE (The Initiation of a
Shango Priest)
**Reading load:** Approximately 100-150 pages/week

**Course objectives:**

To provide students with an introduction to theories of sacrifice, which pay particular attention to symbolic form, by focusing on symbolic technologies such as surrogacy, abnegation, substitution, consecration, incorporation, externalization, mimesis, and identification cross-culturally. The students will learn to identify and apply, as well as critically appraise, sacrificial procedures in rhetoric and/or metaphor, concrete violent acts or in deep structure, in contexts which lie outside the usual sphere of religion and ritual proper such as the juridico-political, nationalism, democratic form, gender and sexuality, war, genocide, and ethnic conflict. The seminar will also introduce advanced students to three case studies, which deal with mass violence, and thus enable comparison in relation to the theoretical texts addressed.

To help students gain proficiency in the use of critical thinking skills in their assessment of analytical texts on violence, ritual, and religion, anthropological and ethnographic writing, psychoanalysis, history, political science, reports, media, and documentary film.

To provide students with the training of reading and presentation skills, the use of central concepts and approaches to society and culture, and a comparative approach to cultural and social difference in the context of violence.

**Readings:**

Readings will be on two-hour reserve at the Reserve Desk in Mabel Smith Douglas Library (8 Chapel Drive, Douglas Campus) and/or on electronic reserve on Sakai.

**Course Requirements and Grading Criteria:**

Take Home Mid Term Exam (30%), 4-5 pages. Take Home Final Exam (30%), 4-5 pages. Class Participation (30%), Oral Presentation (10%). Students have to complete all readings, participate in class discussion, and write 2-3 questions about each reading in question to be handed in every class. **There will be no extra-credit.** Students found cheating on exams, handing in exams containing plagiarized passages, or otherwise violating academic integrity policies will be turned in to the appropriate Dean for punishment. Please familiarize yourself, therefore, with the Rutgers academic integrity policy, posted online at http://ctaar.rutgers.edu/integrity/policy.html.
Week 1. Theoretical approaches to sacrifice and violence (Thurs. 24th January)


Recommended

Week 2. Theoretical approaches to sacrifice and violence (Mon. 28th/Thurs. 31st January)


Recommended:

Week 3. Theoretical approaches to sacrifice (Mo. 4th/Thurs. 7th February)


Recommended:

Week 4. Sacrifice, Initiation, and Possession (Mo. 11th/Thurs. 14th February)


Recommended:
MID TERM TAKE HOME EXAM (Before Spring Break)

Week 5. Anti-Jewish pogroms (Mo. 18th/ Thurs. 21st February)


Recommended:

Week 6. Category systems: Pollution (Mo. 25th/Thurs. 28th February)

Douglas, Mary. 1966 Purity and Danger. An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo. TBA.

Recommended:

Week 7. Witchcraft (Mo. 3rd/Thurs. 6th March)

Siegel, James T. 2006 Naming the Witch, pp. 29-52;

Recommended:

Week 8. Pogrom in India (Mo. 10th/Thurs. 13th March)


Recommended:
**Week 9.** Movie TBA (Mo. 17\textsuperscript{th}/ Thurs. 20\textsuperscript{th} March)

**Week 10.** Genocide in Rwanda (Mo. 24\textsuperscript{th}/ Thurs. 27\textsuperscript{th} March)

Gourevitch, Philip. 1999 “We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families.” Stories from Rwanda. Picador USA, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York. TBA


Recommended:

**Week 11.** Death, Nation, and Immortality (Mo. 31\textsuperscript{st} March/Thurs. 3\textsuperscript{rd} April)


Recommended:

**Week 12.** Liminality, Invisibility, and Belonging (Mo 7\textsuperscript{th}/Thurs 10\textsuperscript{th} April)


Recommended:
Van Gennep, Arnold. 1909 Rites of Passage.

**Week 13.** Death, Feast, and Eroticism (Mo 14\textsuperscript{th}/Thurs 17\textsuperscript{th} April)

Bataille, Georges. 1962 [1957]. Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality. TBA.


Recommended:
Bakhtin, Michael. 1987 Rabelais and his World.

**Week 14.** Conclusion (Mo 21\textsuperscript{st}/Thurs 24\textsuperscript{th} April)

**FINAL TAKE HOME EXAM**