

Arvilla Payne-Jackson, Howard University



Arvilla Payne-Jackson is a Professor in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she teaches courses in anthropology, linguistics, and ethnographic methods. She is the co-author of Jamaica's Ethnomedicine: Its Potential in the Healthcare System (2000) and author of John Lee — An African American Herbal Healer (1993).

The course “Magic, Witchcraft, and Healing” is designed to stimulate students to think beyond understanding religion as simply a structured or organized institution or system of faith that worships a Supreme Being or multiple deities; magic as an art practiced by a magician onstage who uses illusion and deception to entertain an audience; witchcraft as the casting of evil spells and the use of powders and potions to cause harm or death; and healing as treatment using drugs to “kill” germs or viruses.

Students are challenged to examine their own belief systems and to explore the interrelationships between magic, witchcraft, religion, and healing. Readings and discussions help them to address their view of religion not only as a formal institution, but also as an attitude — a state of life, devotion, and conscience. They learn to see magic as it is manifested in both religious and health practices and beliefs across cultures, and to distinguish between sorcery — a learned art — and witchcraft as an inherited characteristic or a religion, as in the United States. Healing is represented as more than dressing a wound or medicating a disease, but also as a means of making whole through reconciliation, purification, or cleansing — a restoration to wholeness — physically, mentally, and spiritually.

This course is an adaptation of one taught by the late Dr. Michael Kenny at Catholic University. The significance of each topic is examined from a cross-cultural perspective. The underlying theme and organizational concept is the seeking and manipulation of power. Topics covered during the course include religion, ritual, myth, symbols, mana, tabu, cults, witchcraft, demonology, death and dying, and folk medical and biomedical healing systems, among others.

Lectures provide the basic concepts and foundation for the topics covered in the course, including a historical overview, definitions, and theoretical perspectives. I give cross-cultural examples and make comparisons that highlight how different cultures frequently use similar basic mechanisms of explanation but dress them differently. Students engage in different kinds of learning experiences — lectures, videos, assigned readings, discussions, and assignments that involve self-evaluation, research, and some fieldwork. The learning goals are to stimulate students to explore their own understandings of the supernatural, and how those understandings affect the ways in which they relate to others, live their daily lives, and interact with the environment. Students are encouraged to share with others many of their beliefs, stereotypes, experiences, and questions that they are otherwise hesitant to discuss, due to the stigma attached to belief in the supernatural and paranormal.

Discussions held in class include sharing of personal experiences that the instructor and/or students have had. Discussion flows more freely if I open with my own experiences and then asks students to share theirs. It is important to recognize and validate the shared experiences and maintain a nonjudgmental environment. An alternative to discussing personal experience is to open with examples of common experiences, e.g., thinking about someone and they phone, having premonitions or dreams following which the event actually occurs, using a particular object that is imbued with mana to insure success, or exploring cultural beliefs on a broader scale (e.g., illness as a result of breaking tabus), such as sexually transmitted diseases.

Videos illustrate cultural variations of topics under discussion. For example, we contrast great and little traditions of the Roman and Mayan civilizations, and how political leaders used their religious cosmologies in similar ways to build and manipulate the power base and political structure of their governments. We then compare these examples with the role of religious beliefs and cosmologies in today's political arena. Other videos cover topics on syncretic religions (Bahá'í), symbolism (Hopi), superstitions (Western), burial rituals (Jewish), exorcism (American and Wape), folk medicine (African American), and divination (Africa). Television documentaries on PBS and the Discovery Channel provide an additional rich resource of videos.

Students undertake three basic assignments over the semester: a ritual report, a funeral report,

and a service learning project. The ritual report requires students to attend, as participant-observers, a ritual (secular or religious) of their choice (with permission from the instructor) that they have not attended before. The report involves selecting a definition of ritual, writing up preconceptions about the event, describing the location and actual structure of the ritual and the role of all the participants, discussing the latent and manifest functions of the ritual, comparing their ritual to the definition selected, and reflecting on what they learned from the experience.

The object of the funeral report is to help demystify death and allow students to explore their feelings about death and the afterlife. Students plan their own funerals or one for a person of the same ethnic and social class background. The report begins with students discussing the philosophy that shapes their approach to planning the funeral. The report also requires an obituary and death notice, as well as a full description of how the service will be performed. Funeral home directors, clergy, newspapers, and online resources provide the particulars of preparing for the funeral and the costs. They must also include relevant information concerning legal requirements involved, from the time of death, through the movement of the body from place of death, to the actual burial.

The third assignment includes a service learning component. Students work with Solutions VII, Inc., a faith-based organization that focuses on strengthening families and bringing healing and wholeness to communities in the metropolitan area. This is an ongoing project. Each time the course is taught, different topics are addressed according to the task at hand. These have included organizing and putting on a workshop on domestic violence and the role of the faith community in dealing with this issue, and organizing and implementing the Race Against Violence.

The final exam, involving essay questions, is handed out at the beginning of the semester and is due at the end. Students are required to discuss the relationships among the different concepts and topics covered during the semester, and must include references (properly cited) from their readings, the videos, discussions, and their own research, observations, and experiences.

Occasionally a parent calls to find out what the content of the course is and to make sure that their child is not being taught “how to do” witchcraft. Most students are not experienced in doing field research or analyzing data collected firsthand. Therefore, they are allowed to rewrite their assignments to develop their skills of observation and writing. Funeral reports may invoke apprehension, in that students are leery of writing about their own death. Therefore, it is important to offer the option of writing the report for a fictitious person of the same ethnic and

social background. It is also important that funeral reports reflect realistic circumstances. For example, a viewing or wake taking place during set hours on one or two days, but not three full days from morning until night. In summary, this course allows students to expand their understanding of their own worldviews, as well as to gain an appreciation and understanding for others. They also learn that religion, magic, witchcraft, and healing do not exist separate and apart from each other. The course provides an opportunity to explore students' own perceptions of what these phenomena are, without feeling overwhelmed or judged. Classroom discussions and assignments provide a format for students to come together as a group and openly dialogue about their experiences and beliefs. They leave the semester with a better understanding of how to view a culture holistically, explore cross-cultural similarities, and appreciate the wealth of diversity. Students learn to examine beliefs within the context of experience and strip away the labeling of "others' beliefs and cultures" as exotic.

Selected Resources

DeStefano, Anthony. *Latino Folk Medicine*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*. 6th ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Goodpasture, H. McKennie, ed. *Cross and Sword*. New York: Orbis Books, Mary Knoll, 1989.

Hand, Wayland. *Magical Medicine*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

Harner, Michael, ed. *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Huntington, Richard, and Peter Metcalf. *Celebration of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Kiev, Ari. *Curanderismo: Mexican-American Folk Psychiatry*. New York: Free Press, 1968.

Knab, Timothy. *A War of the Witches*. San Francisco: Harper, 1995.

Landy, David, ed. *Culture, Disease, and Healing*. New York: Macmillan, 1977.



Murphy, Joseph. *Santería: An African Religion in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

Murphy, Joseph. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Olmos, Margarita Fernandez, and Lizabeth Paravisim-Gebert. *Healing Cultures*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Romanucci-Ross, Lola, Daniel Moerman, and Laurence R. Tanore. *The Anthropology of Medicine: From Culture to Method*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1997.

Snow, Loudell. *Walkin' over Medicine*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993.

Somé, Malidoma Patrice. *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine DeGruyter, 1969.