Anthropology of Spiritualities and the Metaphysical
Summer 2026
Boğaziçi University

Instructor: Zeynep Özbarlas Kırnalı
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Office Hours: By appointment
Class Time and Place: MThF 12-2pm, Sociology Seminar Room

Course Description:

This course explores metaphysical phenomena that fall outside institutionalized religions, including magic, animism, witchcraft, spirit possession, and spiritual movements such as contemporary New Age practices. We begin with classic anthropological studies of these phenomena and then move to recent ethnographies that show how spirits and metaphysical beliefs continue to shape everyday life today.

Rather than treating ghosts or spirits as confined to a supernatural realm, we will look at the ways they take part in socio-political and economic life and institutions. We will ask how they shape and interact with governments, legal systems, secular discourse, and modern values, even when these regimes attempt to regulate or suppress them.

In the final weeks, we turn our attention to the growing popularity of New Age spirituality and examine its relationship to technological innovation, conspiracy culture, and neoliberal ideologies.

Course Requirements:

This course is discussion based. Your active participation is mandatory. During class time, I will give brief lectures to introduce and clarify key concepts and theories. You are expected to attend every session, arrive on time, complete the assigned readings in advance, and come prepared for discussion. Because the summer term is short, I have selected concise readings and will highlight essential sections or shorter versions when appropriate. In return, I expect you to complete all assigned readings. All materials will be available on the online platform.

Class Participation & Attendance (25%): Attendance is mandatory and absences are excused only with documented reasons. Class discussion is a collective effort. Participation is evaluated for quality rather than quantity and for how well you help create an open and constructive space for debate. A willingness to grapple with ideas in a collaborative spirit is valued more than a display of mastery.

Ways to participate

- Read aloud or point to passages you find significant and offer commentary.

- Ask focused questions that show genuine engagement, even if parts of the reading were unclear.
- Respond thoughtfully to the comments of your peers.
- Draw connections or highlight differences between texts.

Weekly response papers (25%):

The class will be divided into two groups. Each day, one group will submit a one-to-two-page response to the assigned readings for that day. Beginning in week two, you will submit a total of five responses over the term. I will provide guiding questions each week. These response papers are an opportunity to practice your writing skills and prepare for class discussion.

In class presentation (10%):

You will present one of your response papers and pose two or three questions to open the discussion on the third class day each week.

Dialogue essay (15%):

Choose at least two readings from the first three weeks of the course and put them in conversation. You may write this as a dialogue, play, or short story. No outside sources or citations are required. The goal is to articulate, compare, and contrast the main arguments and concepts of the two texts in a concise and meaningful way, and to show how they relate to one another. You will present these essays in class. **Due July 28, 2026.**

Final paper (25%):

A 4-page, double spaced essay. We will discuss this assignment in class. **Due August 15, 2026.**

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism at any level will not be tolerated. All assignments will be submitted through Turnitin. It is your responsibility to ensure that your work is original and properly cited. Submissions flagged for AI generated content or for uncredited use of sources will be reviewed and may incur penalties. For guidance on citation and academic integrity, see the Boğaziçi University Online Writing Lab website.

Classroom conduct:

This course engages issues on which people often hold strong views. Everyone is entitled to their perspective and a voice, and I encourage respectful debate. Our goal is to learn from one another and to communicate ideas clearly and persuasively. Treat all classmates with respect, whether or not you agree with their views. Intolerance, personal attacks, slurs, insults, harassment, or other offensive language or behavior are not permitted.

READING SCHEDULE:

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

July 6: Short Readings to Introduce the Scope of the Class

Alireeza Doostdar, Iranian Witch
https://thenewinquiry.com/portrait-of-an-iranian-witch/

Marx, Karl. 1978 [1867]. "Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof." *The Marx-Engels Reader.* Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 319-329.

Stocking, George W., Jr. 1971. "Animism in Theory and Practice: E. B. Tylor's Unpublished Notes on 'Spiritualism.'" *Man* 6 (1): 88-104.

July 9: Canonical Works

Turner, Victor. 1969. "Liminality and Communitas." *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure.* New York: Routledge. 94-132.

Mauss, Marcel. 1990 [1925]. "The Exchange of Gifts and the Obligation to Reciprocate." In *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W. D. Halls. London: Routledge.

July 10: Witchcraft in Anthropological Perspective

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1976. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among Azande*. London: Oxford University Press.

Suggested Reading:

Luhrmann, Tanya M. 1990. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. Harvard University Press.

WEEK 2: HOW TO STUDY WITCHCRAFT AND SPIRITS

July 13: Belief and Disbelief

Taylor, Charles. 2008. "Buffered and Porous Selves"
https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves

Turner, Edith B. 1993. "The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?" *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4 (1): 9-12

Nadasdy, Paul. 2007. "The Gift in the Animal: The Ontology of Hunting and Human–Animal Sociality." *American Ethnologist* 34 (1): 25–43

Suggested readings:

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1948. *Magic, Science and Religion*. Doubleday.

July 16: The Ontology of Doubt and the Unknowable

Bubandt, Nils. 2014. *The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (selected parts)

Suggested reading:

Bubandt, Nils. 2009 "Spirits as informants and the politics of possession in North Maluku". *Ethnography*. Vol 10(3): 291–316.

July 17: Animism, Personhood, and Belief as Practice

Willerslev, Rane. 2007. *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs.* Berkeley: University of California Press. (selected parts)

WEEK 3: SPIRITS IN SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC LIFE

July 20: Dreams and Spirits as Political Resistance

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1997. "The Time of History and the Times of the Gods." In *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, edited by Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, 35-60. Duke University Press.

Mittermaier, Amira. 2012. "Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim Subjectivities beyond the Trope of Self-Cultivation." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(2): 247–265

Elisha, Omri. 2020, Placing the pandemic in time: Astrology and Covid-19. https://tif.ssrc.org/2020/08/13/placing-the-pandemic-in-time-astrology-and-covid-19/

Suggested Readings:

Elisha, Omri. 2024. "Mirrors of the Past: Time and Historical Consciousness in Contemporary Western Astrology." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 67 (1): 223–248.

Delgadillo, Theresa. 2011. *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*. Duke Univ. Press.

July 23: Spirit Possessions: Other Worldly Agencies

Crapanzano, Vincent, and Vivian Garrison. 1977. "Case Studies in Spirit Possession." *American Ethnologist* 5(1): 186-88.

Gustafsson, Mai Lan. 2007. "The Living and the Lost: War and Possession in Vietnam." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 18 (2): 56-73.

Ong, Aihwa. 1998. "The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia." *American Ethnologist* 15(1): 28-42.

Suggested Reading:

Stevenson, Lisa. 2014. "Chapter 3: Anonymous Care." In *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*, 73–100. Oakland: University of California Press.

July 24: Possession, Personhood, and the State

Boddy, Janice. 1988. "Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance." *American Ethnologist* 15(1): 4-27.

Johnson, Paul C. 2016. "Possessed Persons and Legal Persons in Brazil." *Maryland Journal of International Law* 31(1): 180-216

WEEK 4: DEFINING AND DEFYING THE CATEGORY OF SPIRITUALITY

July 27: What Is "Spirituality"?

Fuller, R. 2001. Chapter 5: Powers of the Hidden Self. In *Spiritual But Not Religious*. Oxford University Press.

Heelas, Paul. 1996. "Introduction." In *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, 1–18. Oxford: Blackwell.

July 30: How to Study Spirituality

Bender, Courtney. 2010. "Shamans in the Meetinghouse: Locating Contemporary Spirituality." In *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*, 1–24. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Soyubol, Kutluğhan. 2019. "In Search of Perfection: Neo-Spiritualism, Islamic Mysticism, and Secularism in Turkey." *Modern Intellectual History* 18(1): 70–94.

July 31: Spirituality within Modernity

Doostdar, Alireza. 2018. "Introduction." In *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*, 1–25. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dole, Christopher. 2012. "Introduction" in *Healing Secular Life*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Introduction

WEEK 5: CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITIES

August 3: Spirituality and Neoliberalism

Rudnyckyj, Daromir. 2009. "Spiritual Economies: Islam and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Indonesia." *Cultural Anthropology* 24 (1): 104–141.

Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. 2005. "Spirituality and the Privatisation of Asian Wisdom Traditions." In *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, 87–122. London: Routledge.

Suggested Reading:

LoRusso, James Dennis. 2018. *Spirituality, Corporate Culture, and American Business: The Neoliberal Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capital*. Bloomsbury Academic

August 6: Manifestation and the Soul of Money

Crockford, Susannah. 2022. "How to Manifest Abundance: Money and the Rematerialization of Exchange in Sedona, Arizona, USA." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.

Bethany Moreton, 2007. "The Soul of Neoliberalism." *Social Text*, 25 (3):103–123.

August 7: Spirituality and Technological Futures

Farman, Abou. 2019. "Mind Out of Place: Transhuman Spirituality." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87(1): 57-80.

de Rachewiltz, Michael. 2021. "Are 'Spiritual Machines' Possible?" In *Religion in the Age of Digitalization: From New Media to Spiritual Machines*, edited by Giulia Isetti, Elisa Innerhofer, Harald Pechlaner, and Michael de Rachewiltz, London: Routledge.

WEEK 6: NEW AGE AND CONSPIRITUALITY

August 3: UFOs and the Uncanny: Affective, Economic, and Colonial Imaginaries

Press, Lepselter, Susan Claudia. 2016. *The Resonance of Unseen Things Poetics, Power, Captivity, and Ufos in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (selected parts)

August 13: Conspirituality: Magic, Politics, and Counter-Narrative

Parmigiani, Giovanna. 2021. "Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89 (2): 506–529.

Crockford, Susannah. 2021. "What Is Wrong with America? Conspiracy Theories as Counter-Narrative." In *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona*, 153–178. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

August 14: Conspiracy in the Post-Secular Age

Agrama, Husein. 2020. "Secularity, Synchronicity, And Uncanny Science: Considerations and Challenges." *Zygon* 56(2): 395-415.