**Witchcraft and Religion in Ghana**

Independent study with Alexandra Luke  
Spring 2018

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**Meetings:** Alternate Thursdays, 3:30-5:00pm in Professor Coe’s office

**Course Description**This course is a reading course on the anthropology of witchcraft in Africa, with a particular focus on Ghana. It begins with the earliest and most influential anthropological work on witchcraft, which argues for witchcraft’s rationality as a system of explanation for unfortunate events. It then moves to newer approaches which argue that witchcraft is a modern phenomenon responding to economic inequality and political power. Ethnographies covering witchcraft in politics and economic impoverishment as well as in family life are included. Pentecostal Christianity as a new method to combat witchcraft, in comparison to the innovative shrines and shrine priests of 1920s Ghana is the topic of the final ethnography. All the readings are ethnographies which use anthropological theories and methods, based on empirical long-term field research with people and aim to elucidate those people’s beliefs and practices, from their own view of the world.

**Schedule of Readings**

**Tuesday, January 16th, 12:45-1:45pm**Professor Coe gives a brief overview on witchcraft in Africa and anthropology and introduces the course material.

**February 1st**  
Reading: E. E. Evans-Pritchard. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 [be sure to use this abridged edition, rather than the earlier, longer one].

**February 15th**Reading: M. J. Field, *Search for Security: An Ethno-Psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1960, focusing particularly on part 1.  
Film: “Healers of Ghana” (1996), by J. Scott Dodds, Harold L. Cannon, and Edward Quarshie (58 minutes)

**March 1st**Reading: Wolf Bleek [Sjaak van der Geest]. *Marriage, Inheritance, and Witchcraft: The Case Study of a Rural Ghanaian Family*. Leiden: Afrika-studiecentrum, 1975.

**March 22nd**Reading: Peter Geschiere. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997.

**April 5th**Reading: Harry G. West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

**April 19th**Reading: Birgit Meyer. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe of Ghana.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

**May 3rd**  
Final paper due

**Assignments**

**Papers on the Readings**  
You should write a paper about your thoughts and reflections on the assigned reading in preparation for our discussion. The paper is due at the time of our meeting. The paper should be 4-5 pages, double-spaced, in 12-point font, and with one-inch margins. The first paragraph of your paper should summarize the book’s argument and major themes. In the paper, you might consider the following questions, although you do not have to answer them all. You might choose three or four that are the most relevant for the reading.

* What is the empirical basis for the assertions provided?
* What are the implications of the argument of the book?
* What does witchcraft mean?
* What does witchcraft say about power? Evil? Suffering?
* What are the strategies for dealing with witchcraft? Why?
* How are witchcraft beliefs and practices affected by social and economic change?
* How does witchcraft affect differently positioned persons­­—by age, gender, generation or any other relevant social category?
* How does the book relate to other reading in this course or elsewhere? Does it support the other readings or contradict them?
* What questions do you have after reading this book?
* What in your personal experience relates to what the book discusses or describes, for example in relation to evil, suffering, inequality, or politics?

There will be six papers in all, each worth 10% of your final grade.

**Final Paper, due May 3rd**  
The final paper should be a synthesis of all the readings, comparing and contrasting them, and articulating what you have learned and thought about from the course. In particular, it might address your goals for the independent study, which I have included here:

“I would like to trace the change in socioreligious functions of witchcraft over time in Ghana, and examine in particular the similarities and differences between witchcraft in pre-colonial indigenous religion, and contemporary Pentecostal Christianity. I hope to explore how witchcraft as a concept has functioned/continues to function in these historic and religious contexts. How exactly does the occult fit into each belief system, and how does it affect the people who subscribe to that belief system?

“In tracing the history of witchcraft within Ghanaian religious communities, I would like to understand how the definition of witchcraft has developed, and how attitudes towards it have changed over time. How has it been used by religious communities? How have different members of these communities have been impacted in different ways by the ideas surrounding witchcraft? How, for example, have men been impacted differently than women? The wealthy differently than the poor?

“One function of witchcraft that I am particularly interested in is how it is used to exert power and control. Power over people (how witchcraft accusations are used to marginalise vulnerable groups in society), for example, or perceived power over a situation (if the cause for misfortune or tragedy can be embodied in an individual, it becomes simpler to tackle those misfortunes). In the Pentecostal context, some terms and concepts I hope to look into are ‘witchdemonology’, and deliverance. In traditional Ghanaian religions, I would like to explore the role of fetish priests and witch-doctors.

“Ultimately, I hope to develop a sense of the timeline of witchcraft and its role within Ghanaian religious society. I hope to have enough of an understanding of this broader picture to be able to tell smaller stories, about families and individuals, whilst honestly reflecting the larger societal and religious forces that influence interpersonal relations and personal worldviews.”

The final paper should be 8-10 pages long, double-spaced, in 12-point font, and with one-inch margins. It is worth 30% of your final grade.

**Attendance and Participation**  
Regular attendance and contribution to the discussion of the readings is expected and is worth another 10% of your grade. Please inform me by phone or email as soon as you know that you will be unable to make a class session.