UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Area Studies: Pacific

2526-1-F0102R014

Course title

Rethinking Pacific Islands: Indigenous Insights on Global Change

Topics and course structure

The Pacific Islands region constitutes a heterogeneous and complex space, marked by profound contrasts, enduring relationships, and significant continuities. Long recognised as a privileged site for anthropological enquiry, Oceania has played a foundational role in the development of anthropology as a scientific discipline. In more recent decades, Pacific communities have actively contributed to a critical reassessment of the discipline's epistemological premises and methodological frameworks.
Following a long and complex history shaped by colonial domination, Christian evangelisation, and the moral dilemmas generated by encounters with Western societies, the peoples of the Pacific Islands now face new political, environmental, and socio-economic challenges. These include social and demographic transformations; enduring forms of health and environmental injustice—such as the long-term consequences of nuclear testing; the climate crisis; increased militarisation; and renewed neo-imperialist pressures linked to the unrestrained exploitation of local resources. These dynamics have contributed to a growing scholarly interest in the Pacific Islands region and in Indigenous responses to global change.
The course aims to provide students with analytical tools and resources to better understand the socio-cultural complexity of contemporary Pacific Islands societies. Through a historical-comparative lens, it will explore the entangled relationships between local and global spheres, foregrounding the dynamic tension between creativity and resilience that shapes these cultural contexts.
The first part of the course introduces students to the region's diverse geographical and cultural areas, patterns of settlement, the impact of European contact, and subsequent postcolonial developments (25%).
The second part focuses on the history of anthropology of and in the Pacific, tracing the process of methodological decolonisation within Pacific studies. Special attention is devoted to the Italian academic tradition in Pacific Islands research, which—advocating a theoretical perspective attentive to flows, transformations, and reformulations—foregrounds Indigenous agency and offers an alternative to the rigid postcolonial dichotomy of

“domination/resistance” (25%).
The third part of the course addresses several classical themes in Pacific anthropology—including gift economies and reciprocity; leadership and political organisation; the kastom debate; mobility and practices of coexistence; and processes of memory, identity revival, and heritage-making—through a selection of significant ethnographic case studies. Special focus will be given to the Francophone Pacific (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia), examined within the broader conceptual framework of the European Overseas and in light of recent theoretical approaches centred on cultural creativity (50%).

Objectives

This course, supported by regular and engaged attendance, aims to promote the following learning outcomes, in terms of:

1. Knowledge and understanding
   Students will ACQUIRE a solid grounding in the key authors, theoretical and methodological debates central to Pacific anthropology, as well as in contemporary perspectives within the study of Oceanian societies.

2. Applied knowledge and understanding
   Through the study of ethnographic case studies and the analysis of Indigenous thought, students will be able to IDENTIFY and DESCRIBE the realities that constitute the Pacific Islands region from geographical, cultural, social, and political perspectives.

3. Independence of judgement
   One of the course objectives is to strengthen critical thinking and independent judgement, fostered through reflective and comparative analyses. This approach ENABLES students to appreciate the complexity inherent in the cultural processes of this region of the world.

4. Communication skills
   The course will enable students to DEVELOP an inclusive and non-ethnocentric language, encouraging clear and appropriate articulation of their ideas and knowledge. By the end of the course, students will be able to DISCUSS the phenomena studied with theoretical rigor and well-founded arguments, including through the use of Indigenous terminology.

5. Learning skills
   Finally, the course aims to REFINE students’ autonomous learning strategies by encouraging the identification of relevant topics, themes, and research pathways. Particular attention will be given to the critical evaluation of sources and the interpretation of texts, with the goal of FOSTERING a conscious and reflective approach to anthropological knowledge.

Methodologies

The course will consist of lectures supported by audiovisual materials provided by the instructor, as well as contributions from doctoral candidates and researchers presenting fieldwork studies and/or recently published monographs. This diversified methodology aims to promote active student participation. Therefore, 38 hours of the course will be devoted to classical lectures, while 18 hours will be dedicated to interactive teaching.
The course is delivered in Italian.
Lessons are held in person.

Online and offline teaching materials

Additional teaching materials to the scheduled texts (slides, documents, films) will be made available on the course page.

Programme and references

1. Gnecchi Ruscone E., Paini A. (a cura di), 2009, Antropologia dell'Oceania. Raffaello Cortina Editore.

2. Firth R., 2006, Noi, i Tikopia. Economia e società nella Polinesia primitiva, Laterza, Bari-Roma (selected sections).

3. One book to be chosen among the following:

- Bateson G., 2022, Naven. Un rituale di travestimento in Nuova Guinea, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano.
- Sahlins M., 2017, Isole di Storia. Società e mito nei mari del Sud, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano.
- Carbone C., 2021, Voci indigene e saperi sovversivi. Le donne maori innovano le coscienze, Mimesis Edizioni, Sesto San Giovanni.
- Borgnino E., 2022, Ecologie native, Elèuthera, Milano.
- Niola M., Big Man. Il signore delle isole nere, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano.
- Cottino G., 2022, Il peso del corpo. Un'analisi antropologica dell'obesità a Tonga, Unicopli, Milano.
- Favole A., 2010, Oceania. Isole di creatività culturale, Laterza, Bari-Roma.
- Gentilucci M., 2022, La montagna e il capitale. Il cammino kanak del nichel, Prospero Editore, Novate Milanese.

4. Three short essays (provided by lecturer depending on the book chosen)
   In order to ensure an adequate preparation for the exam, non-attending students and Erasmus students are urged to contact the lecturer for information.

Assessment methods

Oral exam
The choice of an oral exam is consistent with the objectives of the course, as it allows, in a dialogic situation, to assess students' knowledge of the texts and their ability to develop a reflective, analytical, and critical argumentation around the core concepts highlighted in the texts.
Assessment criteria
Students will be asked to present and further explore some of the topics covered in the bibliographic texts. Through subsequent questions, the instructor will assess the knowledge acquired and the level of mastery achieved.
The assessment will be based on the Dublin Descriptors: the level bands are as follows:

1. Low Level (0-17/30): Not sufficient
   Knowledge and Understanding: The student demonstrates limited and fragmented knowledge of the texts and topics covered, with misunderstandings of the texts provided. Ability to apply knowledge: unable to verify general considerations on the authors/topics examined in the texts; able to summarise the contents of the texts presented only to a very limited extent, unable to contextualise and compare them. Autonomy of

judgement: lacks critical thinking and autonomy of judgement; relies exclusively on information provided by the teacher or the critical bibliography. Communication Skills: has a halting, approximate, stereotyped oral expression; shows poor mastery of the specific language of the discipline. Learning Skills: has a limited ability to rework knowledge and relate it to their own experience; shows little awareness of the usefulness of the discipline.

2. Average Level (18-24/30): Sufficient - Good
   Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates a general knowledge of the texts and topics covered, albeit with some gaps, inaccuracies on specific but non-essential aspects, or some misunderstandings in the analysis of the texts. Ability to Apply Knowledge: is able, albeit with some difficulty, to verify in the texts the general considerations on the authors/topics examined, when prompted by teachers; is able to summarise the texts presented in a reasonable manner, interpret them, contextualise them and compare them correctly. Autonomy of Judgement: shows partial autonomy in formulating critical evaluations, often limited to repeating the judgements of others. Communication skills: expresses themselves clearly and with sufficient precision, with a reasonable command of the specific language of the discipline. Is aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation. Learning skills: has a reasonable ability to rework knowledge and link it to their own experience; has partial awareness of the usefulness of the subject.
3. High Level (25-30/30): Distinguished - Excellent
   Knowledge and Understanding: The student demonstrates in-depth and solid knowledge of the texts and topics covered; understands and analyses the texts presented without hesitation. Ability to apply knowledge: is able to identify general considerations on the authors/topics examined in the texts with confidence and effective personal observations; with adequate argumentative skills, is able to analyse, summarise, interpret, contextualise and compare the texts presented, also making use of interdisciplinary links. Autonomy of Judgement: demonstrates excellent critical skills, autonomy of judgement and originality in the analysis and interpretation of texts. Communication Skills: expresses themselves clearly, rigorously, fluently and appropriately. Is fully aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation. Learning skills: demonstrates excellent/very good independent learning skills, is able to effectively rework knowledge and link it to their own experience; is fully aware of the usefulness of the discipline.
   NB: Students with PUOI (special educational needs) must email the document before the exam.

Office hours

On appointment by e-mail.

Programme validity

Programs are valid for two academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

Sustainable Development Goals

CLIMATE ACTION