UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

SYLLABUS DEL CORSO

Culture e Società del Pacifico - Formazione D'Area

2627-1-F0102R014

Course title

Anthropology of the Pacific

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. (eds.), 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 monograph of your choice from 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. Course reader: three short essays (to be agreed upon with the instructor at the beginning of the course). Non-attending students and Erasmus students are invited to contact the instructor for an advisory meeting to ensure adequate preparation for the examination.

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. 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.

2. Average level (18-24/30): Sufficient - Good
   Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates a general understanding of the texts and topics covered. Although there are some minor inaccuracies or a few uncertainties regarding specific, non-essential details, overall the student shows sufficient comprehension and a reasonable ability to analyse the texts.
   Ability to apply knowledge: The student has some difficulty connecting general points to the examples provided in the texts. The summary of the content is sometimes not very effective, and the contextualization and comparison of authors and themes could be further developed.
   Autonomy of judgement: The student demonstrates a fair degree of independence in forming critical assessments, although he or she sometimes tends to rely on the opinions 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: The student demonstrates a reasonable ability to apply knowledge and relate it to personal experience. An awareness of the subject's practical value is present, though it is still developing.

3. Basic Level (0–17/30): Still consolidating
   Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates only a partial understanding of the texts and topics covered. Their grasp of the content is sometimes uncertain and requires further exploration and greater precision in interpretation.
   Ability to apply knowledge: The student finds it difficult to link general considerations to the examples in the texts and to summarise the content effectively. Contextualisation and comparison between authors and themes still need to be developed.
   Autonomy of judgement: Critical thinking and independent evaluation need to be guided through more personal reflection and reworking.
   Communication skills: Oral presentation is at times somewhat halting; it would be advisable to strengthen the use of subject-specific vocabulary and improve precision of expression.
   Learning skills: The student still shows difficulty in personally reworking knowledge and linking it to broader experiences and themes. Greater awareness of the educational value of the subject is desirable.

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