

University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Faculty of Humanities and the Performing Arts
MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Module: Researching Contemporary Cosmologies (compulsory)
Module Code: HPCA7016

(Updated 6 January 2022)

Assessments for HPCA7016

Assessments are designed to test the extent to which you have satisfied the learning outcomes. Masters level degrees are designed to teach certain qualities and skills. The core skills required by the MA in Cultural Astronomy are taught in the compulsory modules and the success with which you achieve them, as expressed by this module's learning outcomes, is assessed by the two assessment tasks. For a summary and further information, see the Student Assessment Handbook.

1. Written Assignment (33% of total marks)

You are required to submit a 2,500-word written assignment using TWO of the following research papers:

Bennett, G. 1995. "If I Knew You were Coming I'd Have Baked a Cake": The Folklore of Foreknowledge in a Neighborhood Group. In *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, edited by Barbara Walker, 122-142. Logan, Utah: Utah University Press. The full book – 'Out of the Ordinary' is available as a PDF from this link: http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1079&context=usupress_pubs (accessed checked 13/1/2021).

Blain, J. 2000. 'Speaking Shamanistically: Seidr, Academia and Rationality'. In *DISKUS Volume 6* (2000). This paper can be found at: <http://jbasr.com/basr/diskus/diskus1-6/blain.txt> (checked 13 Jan 2021). It is given in plain text format so you may want to cut and paste it into a Word document.

Brink, T. L. 1978. 'Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation.' *Review of Religious Research*, 20, 82-85. – Available JSTOR.

Walter, T. & Waterhouse, H. 1999. 'A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England'. *Sociology of Religion*, 60, 187-197. – Available JSTOR.

You will compare and contrast the methodologies used in TWO of the research papers listed above and discuss the position of the researchers in relation to their fields of research. Your essay should address the following three main points:

1. The methodology employed by the researchers: how valid has been their choice of methodology, given the remit of the project?

2. The position of the researchers on the insider/outsider continuum in relation to their target groups: how has this shaped their projects?
3. The literature reviewed by the researchers: how effectively have the researchers related their field work data (from interviews and/or questionnaires) to relevant literature and positioned their projects within a larger academic framework?

The purpose of this assessment exercise is to familiarise you with the methodological problems associated with the evaluation and measurement of informants' opinions, to include a consideration of researchers' relationships with their subjects. It will serve as preparation for the second assessment exercise (the research project).

Remember that your 2,500-word count is inclusive of quotations, which should constitute no more than 5% of the total. The bibliography and references are not included in the word count.

2. Research Project (67% of total marks)

You will submit a 5,000-word report of a research project you have conducted into attitudes to, belief in, or practices associated with, contemporary astrology, astronomy or cosmology (see below).

PRELIMINARY NOTE: Your project must be approved by the University before you commence your research. To obtain approval, you should submit an outline of your proposed research project as required in the **E1 Ethics form**. You cannot begin your field work until your E1 form has been approved. The supporting material that needs to be submitted with your draft E1 form is listed under the Ethics Topic on Moodle.

You select the topic of your research project from one of the following projects while bearing in mind that **your project must relate to your programme of study**.

Each of these topics provide you with a basic academic rationale but you should research your topic and seek to expand this rationale in your E1 form and thus in your final paper.

Research Projects on Cosmology

Project 1, Personal Cosmologies (Beliefs)

Freya Mathews wrote, 'Cosmologies are not of course pulled out of the air to suit the convenience of the communities to which they are attached. They are conditioned by many and various historical, environmental, technological, psychological and social factors. A flourishing community is likely to evolve a bright, self-affirming cosmology, and a languishing community is likely to see the world in darker shades... A good cosmology, in other words, is good for its adherents'.¹ In Chapter 2 of his *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions*, Nicholas Campion references such concepts as cosmogony, cosmophilia, cosmophobia and cosmovision, and develops the idea that all of us have a personal cosmology, or cosmovision, a set of beliefs about the way the cosmos is and works, and how we fit into it.²

¹ Mathews, Freya, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 109.

² Campion, N., *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012).

In this project you will, with a particular group of people, explore Campion's idea that we all have a view about the cosmos, as well as Mathews' view that such a personal cosmology can reflect the individual's attitude to life. To do this you will build a literature review, relate the views and opinions you have collected back to the literature and then provided a finding.

For the module we define such personal cosmologies as any personal beliefs which encompass the sky or cosmos. Thus such notions might typically include issues as whether a group believe the universe is essentially benign or hostile, whether it has a purpose or patterns and whether this extends to individuals. Hence, for example, a belief in aliens from space, or a belief in angels from the sky, a belief in cloud divination, or a belief in the need for space exploration are all topics that fit into this definition.

Project 2: What are the things and/or practices that represent or embody a cosmology? How are they used? What is their role? (Material objects and rituals or habits)

Both rituals and material objects are used in a wide variety of ways in relation to cosmologies. Sometimes they form active and central focal points of cosmological structures (religious statues and images, sacred places), while other times they play more symbolic or passive roles. 'Things' and practices can also form parts of superstitions where they are thought to bring or add luck to situations. Grimes says, 'Each cosmos has its characteristic lilt: If your universe is a womb, your rites go rotund; they moan, slip, slide. If your universe is an orderly, law-abiding, clocklike place looked after by a kindly watch-maker who prefers really, really big grandfather clocks, your rites will run regular as clockwork, be performed as if ritual were, by definition, repetitive, orderly, stately, vertical, by the book.'³

This project therefore seeks to address the 'objects' and rituals/practices that are associated with, represent, or 'embody' elements of cosmology related to the sky. Groups or individual participants can be interviewed re engagement and cosmological views surrounding these objects. This is then related back to the literature provided. Thus, for example, activities at stone circles, public opinions on skyscrapers, or personal habits around the new moon fit all into this project. Moving away from the sky, gardens, landscapes and ecosystems can all embody a cosmology.

A note about the references:

Grimes, Ronald, 2002. "Performance is Currency in the Deep World's Gift Economy: An Incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show". *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. Vol. 9, Issue 1, pp. 150-163.

[Available from Oxford Journals. – Log into the University Resources, find 'Oxford Journals' listed under the 'G-O Resources'. You may need to log in using your TSD Log in. Select Advanced Search and under 'Author' type 'Ronald Grimes '. You will be able to download the full article as a PDF].

Hill, Jude, 2007. "The Story of the Amulet: Locating the Enchantment of Collections". *Journal of Material Culture*. 12. 65-87.

³ Grimes, Ronald, 2002. "Performance is Currency in the Deep World's Gift Economy: An Incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show". *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. Vol. 9, Issue 1, pp. 150-163. p.159.

[To access a PDF of the Hill paper, log on to the University's Resource page (where you go to access JSTOR) and select SAGE Journals and search for 'Jude Hill'.]

Whitehead, Amy, 2009. "The Goddess and the Virgin: Materiality in Western Europe". *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*. 10.1: 163-83. [Available on the RCC Seminar 1 Moodle page.]

Research Project on the Sky

Project 3: Living with the sky (Daily Life)

Tim Ingold argues that our view of the world is altered by living most of our life indoors, inside and that we lack contact with the 'outside'.⁴ Additionally Nicholas Campion points out that the sky has always held a sense of awe and wonder for humanity.⁵ Thus do contemporary humans still seek a connection to the sky and the outside?

This research project allows you to select a group of people and explore, in some manner, their relationship to the sky and take your findings and relate it back to the literature provided. An example of this could be people who plant by the moon.

Ingold, T. (2007). 'Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, S19-S38. JSTOR.

Campion, N. (2008). *The Dawn of Astrology. A Cultural History of Western Astrology, The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London, UK, Continuum Books. MA textbook.

Research Projects exploring beliefs in astrology

Project 4: What do astrologers believe? (The insider perspective)

In 1932 the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) asked the question about astrologers:

Do they believe themselves in the sciences that they profess? This is a difficult question. Everything marvellous is believed by some people, and it is not improbable that professional astrologers are of this type. And even if they are aware that their own performances are largely guesswork and inferences from information obtained otherwise, they probably think that there are superior practitioners who never resort to these inferior methods.⁶

Design a research project that seeks to answer, in a small way, Russell's question. Your target group will be practicing astrologers.

⁴ Ingold, T. (2007). 'Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, pp.19-38.

⁵ Campion, N. (2008). *The Dawn of Astrology. A Cultural History of Western Astrology, The Ancient and Classical Worlds*, London, UK, Continuum Books. p.5.

⁶<http://www.personal.kent.edu/~rmuhamma/Philosophy/RBwritings/HearstColumns/onAstrologer.htm>
Accessed 13 January 2021.

You can also draw on Chapter 12 of Nick Campion's PhD thesis in the MA CAA Online library which examines beliefs amongst contemporary astrologers, or his book Campion, Nicholas, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement* (London: Routledge 2015). You will also need to read Chapter 8, which discusses the meaning of 'belief'. You should also read Chapter 7 of Bernadette Brady's PhD which reports on her questionnaire findings on what astrologers believe about fate. Also useful is Luis Rodolfo Vilhena, *The World of Astrology: An Ethnography of Astrology in Contemporary Brazil, Lampeter: Sophia Centre Press, 2014*.

Project 5: What do people think about astrology? (The outsider perspective)

James Davidson suggests that people like astrology because it keeps them linked to the sky. In 2004 he wrote in the London Review of Books, Vol 26 No 23. 2 December 2004:

I don't believe in astrology but I am rather fond of it. In the first place I like to be reminded that things are happening in the solar system. If Neil Spencer didn't tell me in the *Observer* that Mercury is 'retrograde' – i.e. moving up to overtake us on the inside lane – I would have no idea that Mercury was doing anything at all in our blinded night sky, going forwards, going backwards, or indulging in figures of eight. Anything could be happening out there. The Earth could be lost in space.

This research project uses Davidson's comments to explore how people think about astrology. You can draw on Chapters ten and eleven of Nicholas Campion's PhD thesis in the MA CAA Online library, as well as the PhD thesis of Alie Bird, Bernadette Brady all of which are in the online library.

Your Own Project

Project 6: If you have a clear idea of a project that you wish to undertake and

- a) it fits into the subject matter of the module and
- b) you already have the academic rational and
- c) you already have the supporting literature

Talk to a tutor to see if you can run your own research idea.

3. Points to take into account

The project you select should use fieldwork (interviews and/or questionnaires) while integrating a variety of other sources of information, such as documentary texts. The written essay should include an evaluation of theory and method in researching the cultural context of cosmology, sky or contemporary astrology. Your research question and methodology must be approved by the course tutor.

NB Quantitative material: if you use quantitative material, you should confine your analysis to simple figures and percentages and it must reflect only a minor part of your research project.

Your essay should contain the following:

1. A clear introduction and academic rationale for the research question chosen. **The WHY are you doing this project.** This has been partly provided in the project outlines above.

2. A literature review which discusses previous research in the field, and relevant primary and secondary data and sources. **WHAT has been done before.**
3. Discussion of the methodology employed. **HOW you are going to do your research.**
4. Discussion of the results of the fieldwork in relation to the introduction and to the primary and secondary sources used. **WHAT you found.**
5. A clear conclusion, stating the findings of the research and discussing whether any original hypothesis or hypotheses in the primary and secondary sources used, have been challenged or vindicated. **HOW does this relate back to your aim (the WHY you did the project).**

The bibliography and references are not included in the word count.

Supporting Material

You should keep anonymised copies of interview transcripts or recordings and questionnaires for your own records in the manner described in the Ethic proposals. If you use a questionnaire, include a blank copy in an appendix; this appendix is not included in your word count.

Research with Human Participants

As your project will involve human participants, it is essential to gain prior approval. Prior to commencing any practical research, you will need to complete the E1 Ethics form available on Moodle. No research involving human participants can be conducted until approval has been given. Further details will be provided by your module tutors.

Advice on Research Questions

You should discuss ideas for your research with your tutors primarily through the forum. Also, once you have submitted your draft E1 form, it is most likely that you will be asked to make some edits. Please remember that your research is an **exercise in qualitative methods** and thus is not seeking to prove nor make any 'scientific' claims about a subject. You will be researching matters of practice, belief and opinion: we are thus concerned with the human dimension of a subject.

Sample size

Qualitative research, being concerned with the human experience, does not require large samples. If you are conducting in-depth **interviews, five are sufficient**. If you are distributing questionnaires, the number depends on the type of questionnaire – fewer if you are asking for written responses, more if respondents are required to tick boxes. This can be finalised as you develop plans for your project with your module tutors but generally **20 completed questionnaires are sufficient**.