

SEMINAR IN

## Economic Anthropology

ANG 5937.001, University of South Florida

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“Goods are neutral, their uses are social;  
they can be used as fences or bridges.”

Mary Douglas & Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods*

Left: A Betsileo woman wears a *lamba ho'any* (wrap around skirt) to “surround” herself in riches.  
Right: A Betsileo merchant’s “medicines” for physical, mental, and social well-being include French coins that lost their monetary value ages ago. Photos by Susan Kus, 2006.

“Economics, like politics and science, has declared autonomy from religion, custom, and intuition, or — to use the language of the Enlightenment — society’s moral character. Economic maxims often are cast not as embedded within cultural and historical circumstances and structures of social difference but as universal and invariant over time and space. They can even be presented as ‘natural laws’ akin to those of evolutionary biology or mathematical physics. The danger of this illusion, which is invoked to explain everything from poverty to inequality, is that it obscures hard truths about self interest and social conflict. This [seminar] seeks to pull the curtain back, so to speak, to expose the messy reality of calculation and free will” (P. A. McAnany and E. C. Wells, *Dimensions of Ritual Economy*, 2008:1-2). The purpose of this course therefore is to acquaint you with the major theoretical and methodological perspectives in the anthropological study of human economies, past and present. Since economic activity is *the* most essential activity in which humans engage (apart from biological reproduction), its analysis in the social sciences is vast. To approach the Herculean task of understanding the study of economics in anthropology, we will begin with a hard look at the core debate between substantivism and formalism. We will turn next to critiques of rational behavior in neoclassical microeconomics. We will then examine the roots of political and cultural economy as well as other contemporary approaches. We end by considering the role of worldview, values, and beliefs in motivating economic choices, the emerging approach of ‘ritual economy’. Throughout, we will track the influence of Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don* on anthropological theories of human economic behavior.

## Organization

There are four required books for this course: *Economies and Cultures* (Richard Wilk & Lisa Cliggett, 2007), *The Gift* (Marcel Mauss, 2000), *Inalienable Possessions* (Annette Weiner, 1992), and *The Enigma of the Gift* (Maurice Godelier, 1999). I also highly recommend (but do not require) two additional books, *Arguing with Anthropology* (Karen Sykes, 2005) and *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology* (James Carrier, 2006), which will help you better connect with the literature we will cover.

This course meets once weekly and takes a seminar format. For the first half of the class period, I will lead the discussion, which will be based on a relevant chapter in the Wilk & Cliggett book and additional assigned readings (available as PDF files on Blackboard). After a short break, we will regroup and you and the other seminar participants will take turns leading the discussion about critical theories of “the gift” that we will follow throughout the semester based on works by Marcel Mauss, Marshall Sahlins, Timothy Earle, Annette Weiner, Rhoda Halperin, Maurice Godelier, and others. Since this course takes the form of a discussion seminar, your active and engaged participation is critically important. It is your responsibility to obtain and read all assigned materials and to prepare for weekly discussion. Thoughtful participation in class discussions is required for all seminar participants. Thoughtful participation entails critical as well as productive discussion (evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of an argument and the data used to support it) of theoretical and methodological issues as well as empirical data. Thoughtful participation also occasionally entails reading beyond the assigned text, for example, to look up a source or term mentioned but not fully explained in the reading.

## Deliverables

To help you manage the high volume of literature we will confront in this course, you will use a recent version (X or X1) of EndNote, a sophisticated but user-friendly bibliographic database software program available from the USF Bookstore or on-line (<http://www.endnote.com>). You will use this program to complete a record entry for each of the assigned readings. You must email me your updated library database each week before the class meets. If you do not receive a confirmation email from me acknowledging receipt of the file, then you can assume that I did not receive it. Each database record is worth up to two percent of your final grade. To earn full credit, the record must be complete and you must be present in class to discuss it. In aggregate, record entries and class participation compose 60 percent of your final course grade.

In this course, you will make a contribution to economic anthropology by using your EndNote library to help you construct an essay entry for Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.org>), the largest free-content encyclopedia on the Internet. Your entry should be between 2500 and 5000 words, should include at least 10 relevant references, and must be posted on-line by April 28. The topic is up to you, but must be approved by me in writing. You are welcome to collaborate with your peers, but all work submitted must be entirely your own. The essay entry composes 40 percent of your final course grade.

## Evaluation

Since this class meets once a week and is largely based on discussion, late work will only be accepted if you provide me with written documentation of a specific medical, criminal, or religious situation that demonstrates you were unable to complete the assignment on time. Please note that it is disruptive and unprofessional to arrive late or leave early from class, regardless of the reason.

Performance evaluation in this course includes the following grades: A ("excellent"), B ("good"), C ("average"), D ("poor"), and F ("failing"). These grades are earned based on the following scale of numerical scores: A+ = 98-100, A = 92-97, A- = 90-91, B+ = 88-89, B = 82-87, B- = 80-81, C+ = 78-79, C = 72-77, C- = 70-71, D+ = 68-69, D = 62-67, D- = 60-61, F = 0-59. Note that S/U contracts must be signed by the second class meeting. An "A," "B," or "C" constitutes an "S" grade, while a "D" or "F" is considered a "U" grade. Also note that incompletes will not be issued after April 1, and only then at my discretion. If I approve of your request for an incomplete, you will be required to sign a contract with me, specifying the work to be completed and the deadline for completion.

## Schedule

### *Part 1. "A System of Total Services"*

January 11 Durrenberger & Erem 2007:83-97, Gudeman 2005:94-106, Sykes 2005:59-75  
January 18 Wilk & Cliggett 2007:1-29, Polanyi 1957:243-270, Isaac 1993:213-233  
January 25 Wilk & Cliggett 2007:31-47, Mauss 1990:vii-46  
February 1 Wilk & Cliggett 2007:49-81, Mauss 1990:47-83

### *Part 2. Economy, Politics, and Society*

February 8 Wilk & Cliggett 2007:83-115, Sahlins 1972:185-230, Earle 2002:1-42  
February 15 Spielmann 2002:195-207, Helms 1998:164-173, Mills 2004:238-251  
February 22 Bourdieu 2000:17-41, Weiner 1992:1-65  
February 29 Appadurai 1986:3-63, Weiner 1992:66-155

### *Part 3. From Theory to Practice*

March 7 Film: *Kawelka, Ongka's Big Moka*  
March 14 Spring Break: no class  
March 21 Interdisciplinary Faculty Forum: Crummett, deChant, Graham, Wells, Yelvington  
March 28 SfAA/SAA: no class

### *Part 4. New Directions*

April 4 Wilk & Cliggett 2007:117-151, Thorsby 2001:1-18, Coyle 2007:203-229  
April 11 Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007:1-26, Watanabe 2007:301-322, Halperin 2008:1-20  
April 18 Wilk & Cliggett 2007:153-175, Godelier 1999:1-107  
April 25 Wilk & Cliggett 2007:177-198, Godelier 1999:108-210

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