

Anthropology 116W Observation Paper Assignment

(At the end of the paper, please indicate the total *word count* of the report)

Cultural Anthropologists presently use a technique called *participant observation* to collect data about cultural topics, including religion. In conducting this assignment, you need only stress the “observation” element as you select, describe, and analyze a ceremony or event from a religious tradition with which you are not familiar.

- *The observation activity must take place during this semester. Events that you have attended prior to this semester or that connect to your ethnic, cultural, or historical background may not be used for this assignment.*

The object and elements of the exercise are:

1. for you to gain new experience as an observer
2. to write a description that lets others know what you saw
3. to present a discussion that helps others to understand how and why the activity you observed has spiritual significance *for the participants*.

The first thing to do is select a (non-Christian) religious ceremony or event. Public events that are held regularly are the easiest to access, but if you have a chance to attend a private gathering (with permission) that is fine. For clarity purposes, the “non-Christian” restriction applies to all forms of Catholicism (Catholics) and to all forms of Protestantism (Protestants), the latter of which includes Latter Day Saint (Mormon), Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah’s Witness, all Non Denominational Churches, Scientology, Religious Science, and Unitarian Universalist Churches. What is left? You may choose to observe an American Indian ceremony or event, or a Baha’i, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Daoist/Taoist, Islamic/Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Tenrikyo, or Wicca spiritual event.

Once you have chosen an event to observe, it is not necessary to conduct research of any kind on the group, their belief system, or the event you are about to witness. You certainly may do so if you feel it will help you to better understand what will take place, but do not be surprised if what you read in print does not perfectly match or conflicts with what you actually observe.

Contact the church or group in advance to inform them of your intentions, to obtain permission to observe them, and to gain information about the proper form of attire, the correct starting time of the event, and the likely duration of the event. There may be pre- or post-activities connected with the event that you might be able to observe or to participate in to enhance your experience (some groups provide delicious snacks or meals before and/or afterwards).

Be on time! Attend the event (from start to finish) and observe what goes on [Exception—American Indian powwows—about 4 hours observation time should suffice]. Record what you see in a manner that is respectable to all concerned. If you can, take brief notes during the event, then write up your full description immediately afterwards. Whenever it is appropriate to speak with the participants or spectators, write up what they tell you about why they participate or watch, what it means to them, and anything else you learn. Include a description of the nature of your interactions with them. Also record your own feelings and reactions before, during, and after the observation experience.

Next, transform your notes into a text of description that would enable someone who was not there to be able to follow and understand what you observed. Do not include information you obtained from books or the internet if you conducted pre-observation research. Stick to what you actually observed and experienced. Identify your own religious background so that a contrast with what you have observed is made clear.

Produce a functional analysis of the ceremony you observed, and identify the roles of the individuals involved and or the group as a whole, and any significance to the interactions between and among them. Do not comment on whether *you* think the practices you viewed are positive or not (e.g., “*I don’t think a religious group should do X*” is not an appropriate element in your scientific discussion). Simply state, on the basis of your limited exposure, what you think the functions are or do for the participants and observers, what they gain or how they seem to benefit from the event. In light of your functional analysis, you will need to review your description to be sure the two parts of your paper (the description and the analysis) are complementary.

Last, but not least, discuss what your own feelings were as you engaged the assignment. Did you feel uncomfortable in the setting, did you find the doctrine inexplicable, did you find the ritual off-putting, did you feel spiritually energized, or anything else?

Please note that the style of the observation paper (described above) is not the same as the style used to write the research papers for this course. You will need to type a 1000-1500 word paper (double-spaced/stapled/w page numbers/1 inch margins/spell checked/grammar checked), and turn it in to me on or before the deadline posted in the course syllabus. I welcome papers that are submitted early. For this assignment, a printed paper copy is all that I require. *Do not send me an email copy of your observation report.*