

Hist. 600: Popular Cultures in Africa, 19th-20th century

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Intellectual Goals

“Popular Cultures in Africa, 19th- 20th centuries” will engage with the long-term construction of African cultures and their diversity, in order to encourage the seminar participants to reflect on the historicity of African societies, the challenges Africans faced in the 19th and 20th century, and their overall engagement with, and contribution to, world history.

Contents (tentative)

African cultural life has developed in close contact with the rest of the world, and has experienced considerable innovations in the last two centuries.

We will first discuss how Africans designed tools to produce and transmit their cultures, looking in particular at the co-existence between monotheist and polytheist religions, and at the handling of knowledge from precolonial education systems to colonial and postcolonial schooling. Particular attention will be devoted to gendered aspects in the transmission of African cultures and the making of identities, from the female circumcision crisis in colonial Kenya, to the changing role of women in the new rural and urban environments of the 20th century.

Secondly, the seminar will discuss the history of material culture on the African continent and beyond, from trading commodities to modern music. For instance, we will discuss African visual art from the making of religious charms and luxury items used along the routes of the Atlantic trade, to tourist production starting in the colonial period. Finally, the seminar will introduce students to the cultural underpinnings of early and current challenges, choosing among themes such as slavery, famine and the meaning of poverty, epidemics, civil conflicts, and environmental crises.

Requirements:

Students must expect to read 100-page a week, and participate actively in the class discussions.

The seminar will help you to “make history”, that is to create innovative academic knowledge in the form of a major research paper. In order to improve your writing and research skills right away, you will write either a class portfolio, commenting the readings and the discussion for each week, or three reaction papers for specific sessions. You will then write a longer research essay (15 pages) on a topic chosen in accordance with the instructor.