

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Department of History
Spring 2005

History 861
Selected Topics in African History

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Course Description:

This course will provide an introduction to some of the principal methods, theories, and historiographic trends that characterize African history. After an initial discussion of the challenges professional historians confront in thinking and writing about Africa, we will focus on five broad themes: disputing periodization and historical categories; slavery and African life; rethinking colonialism; the relationship between place, memory, and environment; and health and reproduction. Throughout the course you will engage critical questions surrounding the use of non-traditional historical methodologies and the importance of context in the creation of historical sources. This awareness of the problems of source assessment will hopefully provide a critical foundation for your further research on Africa.

Requirements:

- 1) **Written Assignments:** The course will ask you to concentrate your efforts on weekly reading, writing, and discussion instead of a lengthy research paper. Beginning in week 2, students will be required to write 3-4 page (double-spaced) reaction papers on each week's readings. Each student will be required to write ten of these papers over the course of the semester. Rather than summarizing the readings, your papers should engage them by raising critical questions about the methods, theories, and conclusions put forward by their authors. In short, you should critically assess and analyze the contents of the book and discuss their significance. What contribution do you feel the book makes to African history, how does it do so, and by what methodology? What are the author's outstanding contributions? What are the shortfalls of the book? Students are encouraged in their papers to build upon the readings from previous weeks and to use supplementary readings as necessary. You may wish to peruse the book review section in the *Journal of African History* as a guide. Students will e-mail their papers to me by 3:00 pm on the Thursday before our class meeting on Friday.

- 2) Weekly discussions of the assigned readings are a crucial component of the seminar. You should come to class prepared to share your thoughts on the assigned readings and to actively participate in discussion. Each week, one to two students will be assigned to facilitate the discussion.

Required Readings:

The following books are available for purchase at the University Bookstore:

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*
Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*
Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*
Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*
James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa*
Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*
Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff. *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume I*
Sandra E. Greene. *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter*
Tamara Giles-Vernick. *Cutting the Vines of the Past*
Megan Vaughn. *Curing Their Ills*
Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*
Lynn M. Thomas. *Politics of the Womb*
Johannes Fabian. *Remembering the Present*

Course Schedule:

- 9/2 Week 1. Introduction to Course**
- 9/9 Week 2. Approaching Africa and African History From America**
- Reading: Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*
Joseph C. Miller, "History and Africa/Africa and History" *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No.1 (Feb., 1999), 1-32. (Available through JSTOR)

DISPUTING PERIODIZATION AND HISTORICAL CATEGORIES

- 9/16 Week 3. Is Precolonial Africa Dead?**
- Reading: Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*
- 9/23 Week 4. Is Precolonial Africa Alive?**
- Reading: Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*

SLAVERY AND AFRICAN LIFE

9/30 Week 5. A Case Study from East Africa

Reading: Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*

10/7 Week 6. Rethinking the African Diaspora

Reading: James Sweet, *Recreating Africa*

COLONIAL RULE

10/14 Week 7. Rethinking Colonialism

Reading: Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*

10/21 Week 8. Who Makes Colonialism and How?

Reading: Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. I

PLACE, MEMORY, AND ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICAN HISTORY

10/28 Week 9. Encounters with the Sacred

Reading: Sandra Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter*
Neil Kodesh, "History From the Healer's Shrine: Genre, Historical Imagination, and Early Ganda History"

11/4 Week 10. Environment and Memory

Reading: Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past*

HEALTH AND REPRODUCTION

11/11 Week 11. Assessing the Influence of Colonial Medical Practices

Reading: Megan Vaughn, *Curing Their Ills*

11/18 Week 12. The Medicalization of Childbirth in Colonial Africa

Reading: Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo*

11/25 Week 13. Thanksgiving Break

12/2 Week 14. The Circumcision Crisis in Colonial Kenya

Reading: Lynn Thomas, *The Politics of the Womb*

AFTER ALL THIS, WHAT IS HISTORY OF AFRICA?

12/9 Week 15: Popular Painting as Communication

Reading: Fabian and Tshibumba Matulu, *Remembering the Present*
Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in F. Cooper and A. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire*, 152-60