

Hist 200: Introduction to African History

Fall 2012

Time: Tuesdays 8:35 AM - 9:55 AM (lecture), Thursday 8:35 AM - 9:55 AM (conferences)

Place: Leacock 26 (Tuesday lectures), various locations (conferences)

*Please note, most weeks students will attend conferences **not** a Thursday lecture. See course schedule below.*

Instructor: Dr. Jon Soske

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Office hours: Thursday 11-1:30, or by appointment

Teaching Assistants: Erin Bell, Facil Tesfaye, and third TA tba.

TA office hours will be posted on Minerva and in MyCourses; TA room: Leacock 632

History Student Association advisors can also be seen in Leacock 629

COURSE DESCRIPTION

An eminent historian once remarked that Africa's great lesson to the world was that it was possible for human societies to prosper completely outside of the state. At the time of colonial conquest in the late 19th century, perhaps half of African societies operated without centralized, hierarchical governments; many others developed forms of states that differed in crucial respects from their Eurasian counterparts. Since the very development of modern Homo Sapiens, Africa has served as a laboratory for experimenting with forms of social organization: humans have made their lively hoods in small bands and empires, they have survived in deserts and rainforests; they have carried out intercontinental trade and built vast urban civilizations. Indeed, African history challenges some of the core assumptions of modern political thought: that history begins with the emergence of states; that most people have sought security under the rule of a centralized power; that social complexity requires forms of institutionalized violence, and that a single evolutionary path exists between the emergence of agriculture the formation of large-scale polities. Understanding the diversity of African cultures however, requires that we rethink normative assumptions about the nature of society, politics, and identity inherited from European and Asian models. What forms of social identity pre-existed modern conceptions of ethnicity and nationalism? How do power and authority function in cultures without institutionalized forms of coercion? How do we write histories of societies with radically different concepts of time and causality than our own?

This course will offer a broad overview of African history from the development of early human societies to the period of the Atlantic slave trade. Its main goal is to introduce students to the conceptual resources and methodological tools needed to understand of a range of different African societies, including hunters and gathers, pastoralists, land based empires, and complex states built through long distance trade and slavery. It will also trace the intellectual origins of a number of modern ideas associated with Africa, for example concepts like tribe and race. Additionally, significant attention will be given to different African belief systems. Case studies will be drawn from across the continent, including Egypt, the Kongo, the equatorial rain forests, Ethiopia, the Swahili Coast, medieval Mali, the West African slave coast, and the Ashanti kingdom.

This Course has three aims:

1. Provide students with the analytical vocabulary necessary to understand a range of pre-colonial African societies.

2. Introduce students to major social, political, and cultural developments in sub-Saharan Africa from the emergence of pastoralism to the beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade.
3. Familiarize students with the different methodologies and forms of evidence utilized by historians of pre-colonial Africa, including historical linguistics, archeology, environmental history, historical anthropology, and political philosophy.

READINGS AND COURSE STRUCTURE

Many students find their first introduction to African history challenging and sometimes overwhelming. Immediately, students are confronted with readings that include dozens of unfamiliar names and words from across the continent as well as an entire new conceptual vocabulary. **Don't be scared off!** This is completely natural. In doing the reading, focus on the broad themes and central concepts rather than trying to remember every place, person, and event. The lectures will underline the core concepts and facts of the course.

There are three types of readings assigned each week of the course. They should be read in the order presented on the syllabus. **First**, each week begins with readings from general texts (usually Iliffe) that present a broad overview of a general theme in African history. These “survey readings” should be read for the Tuesday lecture. **Second**, each week includes a text which examines the week's theme through the prism of a specific context or event. These “case studies” should also be read for the Tuesday lecture. **Third**, most weeks include a “conference concept” reading: texts by leading scholars or African intellectuals that address a core concept relevant to understanding pre-colonial African history. These texts will be the focus of the Thursday conference sections.

Please note that we will read a book (*Sundiata*) and watch two films (*Yeelen*, *Guimba, un tyran, une époque*) whose purpose are to introduce students aspects of pre-colonial African societies and pose questions about how these cultures can be represented within the present. These works employ unconventional, non-linear narrative structures and address themes that might not be familiar to students without a strong background in African history. *Students are strongly encouraged to read summaries or reviews of these works online before reading or watching them in class.*

The following items will be available from Librairie Paragraphe (2220 McGill College Ave) and will be on reserve at Redpath Reserves:

Simon Bockie. Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

John Iliffe, Africans: The History of a Continent, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

D.T. Niane, Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali (London: Longmans, 1965).

All other readings are available online. Most can be easily accessed through the McGill library website or Google scholar. A smaller number of readings (marked * on the syllabus) will be posted on the course website.

If you are interested in updates on Africa related events in Montreal, you can follow me on Twitter: Jon Soske @JonSoske. Videos show in class can be found at the Youtube channel

ASSESSMENT STRUCTURE

The course grade will be the sum of the following units:

Map and Syllabus Test:	10%	September 25
Conference Papers:	30%	Due at beginning of each conference
Midterm Exam:	15%	Due October 23
Final Exam:	25%	
Conferences:	20%	

Map and Syllabus Test: Students will be asked to identify major features of African geography (terms will be provided in advance) and answer questions about the expectations and mechanics of the course as described in the syllabus.

Midterm and Final Exams: The midterm and final exams will be “take home.” Two weeks before the exam, students will be given two essay questions about material covered in the class readings, films, and lectures. The questions will be synthetic and require the students to use the analytical terminology discussed in the conferences. The word limit for each answer is 2,000 words.

Conference papers: At the beginning of each conference, students will be required to submit a short position paper on the “conference concept” of the week. The position paper should define the term (and discuss any debates over its definition), describe how the reading situates the term within broader historiographical, theoretical, or political debates, and—when possible—related the term to other course readings. Position papers are limited to **600 words** without exception.

Conferences: Conferences (discussion sections) are an integral part of this course. The participation grade will be based on the student's contributions to discussion based on the assigned readings. **Students who do not turn in a conference paper will not receive participation credit for the conference in question.** Please note the time and place of your conference group (some, but not all, will be in the regular class timeslot). If you have a legitimate reason to miss a conference session, please let your TA know **in advance**, and make arrangements to make up the relevant work.

MYCOURSES

This course will use MyCourses (formerly known as webCT)* for posting announcements, instructions on assignments, exam questions, lecture podcasts, lecture slides, discussion boards, and more. If you have technical problems with MyCourses, e-mail the MyCourses office at support.ist@mcgill.ca, with your McGill ID and the course number. Please remember that technical problems with MyCourses are not the responsibility of the professor or of the TAs.

LANGUAGE and PLAGIARISM

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures. / L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres

infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires.

<http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/assistance/plagiarism/>

<http://www.mcgill.ca/library->

COURSE SCHEDULE (*final version will be posted on myCourses by end of add/drop period*)

▲ = on course website

1. *Course Introduction*

September 6

Read syllabus.

Section I: Conceptual and Epistemological Departures

2. *The Invention of "Africa"*

September 11-13

Survey Texts

Natalie Zemon Davis, "Conceiving Africa," *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006), 125-152.*

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 31-61.*

Conference Concept: Identity

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992), 173-80.*

3. *Egypt and the Historical Geography of Race*

September 18-20

Survey Readings and Case Studies

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 17-32.

Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, translated by Mercer Cook (Chicago : L. Hill, 1974), tba.*

Frank M. Snowden, Jr., "Bernal's 'Blacks' and the Afrocentrists," in Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, eds., *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 112-128.*

Conference Concept: Afrocentrism

Kwame Appiah, "Europe Upside Down: Fallacies of the New Afrocentrism," *Times Literary Supplement* (12 February 1993).*

Section II: Contours of Early African History

4. *The Origins of History*

September 25-27

Survey Reading and Case Study

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 1-16.

Fiona Marshall and Elisabeth Hildebrand, "Cattle Before Crops: The Beginnings of Food Production in

Africa," *Journal of World Prehistory* 16, no. 2 (June 2002): 99-143.

Conference Concept: "The Original Affluent Society"

Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972), 1-39.*

5. *Bantu Languages: Migration, Diffusion, Expansion?*

October 2-4

Survey Reading and Case Study

Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Charlottesville, Va., 1998), 1-30.*

Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 49-83.*

Conference Concept: "Bantu Expansion"

Jan Vansina, "New Linguistic Evidence and 'the Bantu Expansion'," *The Journal of African History* 36, No. 2 (1995): 173-195.

6. *A Sociology of African Societies?*

October 9-11

Survey Readings

Igor Kopytoff, "Introduction," in Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), tba.*

Jack Goody, "Class and Marriage in Africa and Eurasia," *American Journal of Sociology* 76, no. 4 (1971): 585-603.

Conference Concept: Wealth-in-People

Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *The Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 91-120

Section III: African Beliefs/World Beliefs

7. *Visible and Invisible Worlds: Reflecting on Kongo Religion*

October 16-18

Simon Bockie. *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo. Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Thursday Film:

Yeelen, dir. Souleymane Cissé (1987).

8. *The Africanization of Islam*

October 23-25

Survey Text and Case Study:

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 37-62.

Thomas Spear, "Early Swahili History Reconsidered," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000): 257-290.

Conference Concept: Syncretism

Janet McIntosh, *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethno-Religious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press 2009), 177-221.

Survey Text and Case Study:

Graham Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66-108.*

Donald Crummy, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois. Press, 2000), 17-49.*

Conference Concept: Religious Power

Steven Kaplan, "Seeing is Believing: The Power of Visual Culture in the Religious World of Aṣe Zār'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia (1434-1468)," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, no. 4 (2002): 403-421.

Section IV: Power, Ideology, and Belief in Pre-colonial West Africa

10. *The Griot's Magic: Myths of Old Mali*

November 6-8

D.T. Niane, *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longmans, 1965).

Thursday Film:

Guimba, un tyran, une époque, dir. Cheick Oumar Sissoko (1995).

11. *The Atlantic Slave Trade and its Afterlives*

November 13-15

Survey Texts:

John Iliffe, *Africans: A History of a Continent*, 131-63.

Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-37.*

Conference Concept: Sorcery

Rosalind Shaw, "The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity, and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 4 (Nov., 1997): 856-876.

12. *The Powers of the Golden Stool: Ashanti Governance*

November 20-22

Survey Text:

Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, no. 3 (1995): 481-508.

Conference Concept: Democracy

Kwasi Wiredu: "Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for a Non-party Polity," *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 2 (2000).

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, "Democracy or Consensus? Response to Wiredu," *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 2 (2000).

13. *Concluding Thoughts and Exam Review*

November 27-29

Lecture Readings

Graham Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 291-6.*

Pierre Clastres, "Power in Primitive Societies," in *Archeology of Violence*, trans. Jeanine Herman and Ashley Lebnner (Semiotext(e), 2010).

J.E. [Kwasi] Wiredu, "How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought,"
Transition no. 75/76 (1997): 320-327.