

History/CAAS 786  
Dr. Derek Peterson

**Practicum:  
The Work of Writing African History**

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Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30 to 1:00 pm (in 1634 Haven Hall), and by prior arrangement

**Rationale**

This seminar will provide students with a platform on which both to criticize and to practice the craft of writing African history. The seminar is intended for doctoral students in African history and anthropology, but students in other fields will also find the course useful.

This seminar will begin by exploring the history of history-writing in Africa. The first writers of history in Africa were not university-trained scholars. They were African political thinkers, who composed vernacular-language history books alongside sermons, diaries, and dictionaries. The works they composed were addressed to, and helped to constitute, particular audiences. We will together study the textual cultures from which the first African historians came, and the purposes to which the disciplines of writing history could be put. What forms of community did Africa's vernacular-language historians compose?

In the second part of the seminar we will study—and practice—the disciplines that professional writers of history in Africa cultivated. As it developed in universities in Africa, Europe and America during the 1960s, history-writing became a profession, not simply a part-time vocation. It demanded—and continues to demand—certain competencies and habits of mind of its practitioners. As the Cambridge medievalist Christopher Cheney once put it, 'Records, like the little children of long ago, only speak when they are spoken to, and they will not speak to strangers'. 'Source material' was first composed as advocacy, as organizational work, or as rhetoric; and historians' particular task is to reconstruct the habitus that our sources once spoke within. In this seminar we will study the techniques by which recalcitrant sources can be positioned in a context, and use them to develop insights into the shape of life in the past.

In the third part of the seminar you will draft, develop and refine a research paper based on primary source material. These sources may come from the research work that you have earlier conducted; or you might use the opportunity to collect new research material, whether from grey literature available in the university's libraries or from the rich archival collections available on microfilm from the Center of Research Libraries. You will over the course of term compose short essays about particular sources, and develop arguments based on the material you've worked over. The aim is to produce a publication-worthy piece of historical analysis by the end of the semester.

## Requirements

1. The most fundamental requirement for this course is **attendance and participation**. Good seminars happen when participants are ready to discuss the reading. So please do come prepared to each session.

2. You will over the course of the term compose **three essays of source criticism**. These short essays will be tabled on 14 January, 28 January, and 11 February. Essays should be submitted to me over email by 6:00 pm on the Wednesday before the seminar meets.

Essays on source criticism are to be practical in orientation: you should choose a particular source (or set of sources, where appropriate) and place the source in its rhetorical and intellectual context. Who composed it, and against whom was the author arguing? When was it composed, and with what purpose? And what consequences followed from its composition? Answering these questions will require you to develop an intimate familiarity with the source, study its structure, and learn the rules by which people in the past conducted their debates.

3. Over the course of the semester you will frame, research, and write a **research paper** about some aspect of Africa's history. This paper must be based on primary source material. You may use sources you've earlier collected in previous research; or you may use the opportunity to conduct new research on sources available through the university library. Research papers will be composed in several stages:

18 February: Prepare a brief (c. 500 word) **proposal**, including a thesis paragraph, an outline, and a short bibliography.

11 March: Compose something approaching a **section**, or several sections, of the research paper.

1 April: Prepare a **first draft** of the paper.

15 April: Compose a **second draft** of the paper.

In every case, your work should be submitted to me over email by 6:00 pm on the Wednesday before the seminar meets.

The **final version** of the paper—duly edited and revised—is due on **Friday, 23 April at 4:00 pm**, on paper to my mailbox in the History Department. There is no strict word limit, but a cap of 10,000 words is normal for most scholarly journals.

## Texts

The following books are required for this seminar:

Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2008).

Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, eds., *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Ohio, 2009).

Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Duke, 1993).

All of these books are available for purchase at Ulrich's, Michigan Book & Supply or the Michigan Union Bookstore. *Please do bring a copy of the assigned readings to the seminar where they are to be discussed.*

Where I've assigned articles or book chapters, they can be downloaded from the CTools website associated with the course, under the 'Resources' tab.

### **\*\*Schedule\*\***

*Week One, 7 January*

#### **Introduction**

Introduction to the seminar

*Week Two, 14 January*

#### **The Composition of History**

##### Read:

Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, eds., *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Ohio, 2009).

Lord Acton, 'The Study of History', in *A Lecture on the Study of History* (London, 1895).

George Macaulay Trevelyan, 'Clio: A Muse', in *Clio: A muse, and other essays* (Ayer Publishing, 1968 [1913]).

G. Kitson Clark, *Guide for Research Students Working on Historical Subjects* (Cambridge, 1958).

John Lonsdale, 'Contests of Time: Kikuyu Historiography, Old and New', in A. Harniet-Sievers, ed., *A Place in the World: New Local Historiographies from Africa and South Asia* (Brill, 2002).

##### Write:

An essay of source-criticism, 2-3 pages in length, dealing with a single source.

*Week Three, 21 January*

**How to Read**

Read:

Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2008).

J.D.Y. Peel, 'For Who Hath Despised the Day of Small Things: Missionary narratives and historical anthropology', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (3) (1995), 581-607.

*Week Four, 28 January*

**How to Translate**

Read:

Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Duke, 1993).

Walter Benjamin, 'On the concept of history', in Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, eds., *Selected Writings, vol. 4, 1938-1940* (Harvard, 2003).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History', in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

Write:

Another essay of source-criticism, 3-4 pages in length, dealing with at least two sources.

*Week Five, 4 February*

**Model essays I: How to Write Intellectual History**

Read:

Paul Bjerck, 'They poured themselves into the milk: Zulu political philosophy under Shaka', *Journal of African History* 47 (2006), 1-19.

Shane Doyle, 'The Child of Death: Personal Names and Parental Attitudes Towards Mortality in Bunyoro, Western Uganda, 1900-2005', *Journal of African History* 49 (2008), 361-82.

*Week Six, 11 February*

**Model essays II: How to Write Political History**

Read:

Sara Berry, 'Unsettled Accounts: Stool Debts, Chieftaincy Disputes and the Question of Asante Constitutionalism', *Journal of African History* 39 (1998), 39-62.

Gregory Mann, 'Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa', *American Historical Review* 110 (2) (2005), 409-434.

Write:

A third essay of source-criticism, 3-4 pages in length, dealing with at least two sources.

*Week Seven, 18 February*

**Prospectus Presentations**Write:

Prospectus for the final research paper, including a thesis paragraph, an outline, and a short bibliography.

*Week Eight, 25 February*

**Reading Week**

Class will not meet.

Week Nine, 4 March

**Spring Break**

Class will not meet.

*Week Ten, 11 March*

**Model essays III: How to Write Environmental History**Read:

Nancy Jacobs, 'The Great Boputhatswana Donkey Massacre: Discourse on the Ass and the Politics of Class and Grass', *American Historical Review* 106 (2) (2001), 405-587.

Jacob Tropp, 'Dogs, Poison, and the Meaning of Colonial Intervention in the Transkei, South Africa', *Journal of African History* 43 (2002), 451-472.

Write:

Something approaching a section, or several sections, of the paper.

*Week Eleven, 18 March*

**Model essays IV: How to Write Biography**Read:

Derek Peterson, 'The Intellectual Lives of Mau Mau Detainees', *Journal of African History* 49 (2008), 75-91.

Emily Lynn Osborn, 'Circle of Iron: African Colonial Employees and the Interpretation of Colonial Rule in French West Africa', *Journal of African History* 44 (2003), 29-50.

*Week Twelve, 25 March*  
**Reading Week**

Class will not meet.

*Week Thirteen, 1 April*  
**Work in Progress**

Write:

First draft of the paper

*Week Fourteen, 8 April*  
**Reading Week**

Class will not meet.

*Week Fifteen, 15 April*  
**Presentations**

Write:

Second draft of the paper