New Directions in African History

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. (in 1634 Haven Hall) and by arrangement

As a field of academic study, African history has been uniquely responsive to the changing tide of politics and economy. The field was born in the 1960s, a time when new nations were born, new archives were organized, and new methods of doing history were opened up. It was a time of brilliant promise. Historians were undoing the conceits of functionalist anthropology: they aimed to show that Africa had a history to be proud of. By the 1970s, economic depression was guiding scholars to pursue research about ‘modes of production.’ In the 1980s and 90s historians sought to ally their work with South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement. They elevated the ‘African voice’ as a means of accessing history-from-below, and 'resistance' became the paradigmatic theme. Most recently, a productive auto-critique has drawn attention to non-discursive, material ways that Africans make history. In this current age, it is hard to see a dominant paradigm. But the study of historiography remains useful—indeed, it is incumbent on any prospective scholar of the field to understand where we stand in relation to older paradigms and ways of thinking. Scholarly work is guided by our acquaintance with particular archives and by our engagements with a constrained body of knowledge. The routines of scholarly production have produced distinctive sub-literatures that can productively be studied.

This course is meant as an introduction to the major themes that have structured the study of African history. Each week's work will be organized around a key text, and student commentators will read and review related texts that illuminate the larger scholarly debate. The books vary widely in their subject matter, methodology, timescale, and geography. That is the point. The aim is to fertilize students’ own research with new ideas, approaches, and problems.

The course will culminate in the writing of a substantial historiographical essay on a topic of the student's choice.

Requirements
The most fundamental requirement for this course is attendance and participation. Please do come to the seminar having done the assigned reading for the week. Make sure to bring the reading with you, as we will be looking at specific passages together.

All seminar participants should prepare two book reviews, of no more than 1,000 words each, for general distribution to the seminar. Books for review are listed below; these will be doled out at the seminar’s first meeting. Book reviews should be circulated to the class by email by 9:00
am on the day the book is to be discussed. Reviewers will make brief (five minute) presentations in class for the benefit of their colleagues.

All participants will lead class discussion—with a partner—on two occasions. Discussion leaders should together prepare a set of questions—no more than five or six, please—which should be circulated to the class by email by 9:00 am on Thursday morning. During the class session discussion leaders will take the class through the texts under study, using the set questions as a guide. We will allocate discussion-leading duties during the first class period.

Over the course of the term students will frame, research, and write a seminar paper about some aspect of Africa’s historiography. I am very keen that students should make use of primary research material in writing these essays. But at its core, this is to be a historiographic essay, reflecting on the development of a particular theme (urban history, for example, or the history of religion, or…) in the study of Africa’s past. What questions guided the linguists, anthropologists and archaeologists who did research on African societies during the earlier twentieth century? What contributions did Africans, as ethnohistorians, pamphleteers, research assistants, informants, or sources make to the changing pattern of academic discourse? What new questions did the first ‘guild’ historians ask in the 1960s and 70s, and what projects were they beholden to? And more recently, how have the changing protocols of the field more broadly shaped scholarly conversation within particular sub-fields? What insights (if any) have economic historians, or social historians, or literary critics made to the particular field under study?

Students should prepare a brief (c. 500 word) proposal to be tabled and discussed at the session on 13 November. The final draft—of roughly 8,000 words in length—will be due on Monday, 15 December by 4:00 p.m. to my pigeonhole in the History Department.

Texts
The following books are required for this seminar:


All of these books are available for purchase at Ulrich’s and 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. Readings available on CTools are marked with a ** below.

**4 September: The Making of African History**


**11 September: No Class**
Instructor at the African Studies Association (UK) meeting

**18 September: South Africa in the longue durée**

Books for review:

25 September: Asante Identities


Books for review:

Sara Berry, Chiefs know their boundaries: essays on property, power and the past in Asante, 1896-1996 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000)

2 October: West Africa, Islam, and Race

Books for review:

9 October: African Print Cultures

Karin Barber, ‘Experiments with Genre in Yoruba Newspapers in the 1920s,’ forthcoming in Stephanie Newell, Emma Hunter and Derek R. Peterson, eds., African Print Cultures. **

Books for review:

16 October: Christianity and Ethnicity
Mark Noll, Justin Willis, J.D.Y. Peel, and Derek R. Peterson, ‘Book Debate,’ Social Science and Missions 27 (2) (2014). **

Books for review:


23 October: Race

Books for review:


30 October: Environmental History


Books for review:
Tamara Giles-Vernick, Cutting the Vines of the Past: Environmental Histories of the Central African Rain Forest (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002).


6 November: Preparing for Isabel Hofmeyr
Ch. 2: ‘Making Bunyan Familiar in the Mission Domain,’ 56-75.
Ch. 3: ‘Translating Bunyan,’ 76-97.

**Books for review:**

**10 November** (Monday)
Please attend the following. Both sessions meet in the Erlicher Room, North Quad.

10-12  A Morning with Isabel Hofmeyr
4-6  Isabel Hofmeyr, ‘Mandela’s Copyright: Intellectual Property and the Postcolonial World’

**13 November: Cultures of Nationalism**


**Books for review:**


**Due:** 500-word proposal for final paper.

**20 November: No Class**
Instructor at African Studies Association (US) Annual Meeting

**27 November: No Class**
Thanksgiving Break
4 December: The Post-Colonial State


Mikael Karlström, ‘On the Aesthetics and Dialogics of Power in the Postcolony,’ *Africa* 73 (1) 2003), 57-76. **

Books for review:


**Monday, 15 December**: Historiographical essay due by 4:00 p.m.