

Welcome to History 861: Seminar in African History. This course will provide an introduction to some of the principal methods, theories, and historiographic trends that characterize early African history. The course is divided into three parts. The first part of the course will introduce you to the sources of evidence that historians find, create, and employ for writing early African history. We will discuss the methods, techniques, and theories historians apply to these sources to craft their narratives, focusing in particular on sources not found in buildings conventionally called archives. By paying close attention to the importance of context in both the creation of historical sources and their use by scholars, we will explore how each type of evidence – archaeological, linguistic, ethnographic, oral, genetic - highlights certain elements of the past while silencing others. In the second part, we will turn our attention to several prominent themes in the historical literature on early Africa published over the last several years: foundational narratives; groupwork and belonging; West Africa and the Atlantic world; and the archaeology of urbanism. Finally, in the third part, we will discuss recent efforts to write regional syntheses of early African history, and also the challenges of teaching early Africa in the undergraduate classroom.

CANVAS COURSE URL:
<https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/261735>

MEETING TIME AND LOCATION:
Friday 11:00 AM-12:55 PM, 5245 Humanities



HISTORY 861 Seminar in Early African History

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In-Person Office Hours
Wednesday, 11:30 AM-1:00 PM
Appointment required via [Calendly](#)
5115 Humanities

Virtual Office Hours via Zoom
Tuesday, 2:00-3:00 PM
Appointment required via [Calendly](#)

Course Objectives

- Develop an understanding of the methods, techniques, and theories historians apply to craft their narratives of early Africa
- Learn how to assess and engage with historical scholarship that draws upon unconventional methods and sources
- Become familiar with some of the historiographical trends that characterize early African history
- Hone academic writing skills
- Design and implement effective strategies for facilitating discussion in class

Required Readings

We will read the following books (all required articles and book chapters are available on Canvas):

Kathryn M. de Luna and Jeffrey B. Fleisher, *Speaking with Substance: Methods of Language and Materials in African History*. Springer, 2019. [Available in PDF format on Canvas]

Kairn Klieman, *'The Pygmies were our Compass': Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c.1900 C.E.*. Heinemann, 2003

Colleen Kriger, *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017

Ndubueze L. Mbah, *Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019

Akinwumi Ogundiran, *The Yorùbá: A New History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020.

David L. Schoenbrun, *The Names of the Python: Belonging in East Africa, 900 to 1930*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.

Jan Vansina, *How Societies are Born: Governance in West Africa before 1600*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004.



Assignments, Requirements, and Expectations

The credit standard for this 3-credit course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit or 9 hours per week), which include regularly scheduled meeting times (group seminar meetings of 115 minutes per week), reading, writing, individual consultations with the instructor, and other student work as described in the syllabus

1) 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. One student will be assigned to facilitate the discussion each week. This will involve three elements: First, the discussion leader will post three questions for us to consider during our class meeting. The discussion leader must post these questions by 8 p.m. on the Thursday before our class on Friday. Second, the discussion leader will make a short (5-10 minutes maximum) presentation at the beginning of the class. Your presentation should be more than a summary of the readings - in fact, you should avoid summarizing the readings if possible - and focus instead on stimulating conversation. Third, the discussion leader will be responsible for facilitating and moderating discussion for the duration of the class. You are welcome to consult with me about your plans for leading discussion for your assigned weeks.

2) The course will ask you to concentrate your efforts on short writing assignments instead of a lengthy research paper. Beginning with week 2 and running through week 11, we will spend two weeks on each of the main themes covered in the course. Over the course of the semester, you will be required to write three 5-6-page (double-spaced) papers. Each of these papers should address and put into dialogue both sets of readings for one of the main themes. You are welcome to build upon the readings from previous weeks and to use supplementary readings as necessary. 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 other words, you should critically assess and analyze the contents of the readings and discuss their significance. What contribution do you feel the book(s) and/or article(s) 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(s) and/or article(s)? Please submit your papers via e-mail (kodesh@wisc.edu) by 5:00 pm on the Thursday before our class meeting on Friday.

3) For weeks in which you do not lead discussion write a paper, each student should post a short response essay (1-1.5 pages) in the "discussion" section on Canvas. These essays should offer critical assessment of the week's readings - significance of the key arguments, most and least persuasive aspects, new research inspired by the work - and may also analyze how the readings relate to other course and outside texts. Since these essays will be available for all members of the course to read, you may also choose in your essays to respond to the observations of your classmates. These essays will serve, along with the introductory remarks prepared by the discussion leader, as the basis for in-class discussions. Please post your response essays in the "Discussion" section on Canvas by 5:00 pm on the Thursday before our class meeting on Friday.

Evaluation

Paper #1: 20%

Paper #2: 20%

Paper #3: 20%

Class Participation, including discussion leadership and short response essays: 40%

Schedule of Class Meetings

Part 1: Stories, Sources, Methods, and Techniques

Week 1 (9/10): Introduction to Course

Week 2 (9/17): Analytical Orientations and Narratives of Early Africa

Reading

Richard Reid, "Past and Presentism: The 'Precolonial' and the Foreshortening of African History." *Journal of African History* 52:2 (2011).

Toby Green, "'Dubbing' precolonial Africa and the Atlantic diaspora: Historical knowledge and the Global South," *Atlantic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 281-295.

Steven Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars and the Creation of Invisible Histories." In *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (1999).

Jane Guyger and S.E. Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History* 36 (1995).

Kathryn de Luna, "Affect and Society in Precolonial Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46.1 (2013): 123-50.

Week 3 (9/24): Interdisciplinarity and Early History

Kathryn M. de Luna and Jeffrey B. Fleisher, *Speaking with Substance: Methods of Language and Materials in African History*. Springer, 2019. [Available in PDF format on Canvas]

Neil Kodesh. "History from the Healer's Shrine: Genre, Historical Imagination, and Early Ganda History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47:2 (2007), 1-26.

Part 2: Historiographic Trends and Emerging Themes

Week 4 (10/1): Foundational Narratives, Part 1

Reading

Jan Vansina, *How Societies are Born: Governance in West Africa before 1600*

Week 5 (10/8): Foundational Narratives, Part 2

Reading

Kairn Klieman, 'The Pygmies were our Compass': *Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c.1900 C.E.*

Week 6 (10/15): Groupwork and Belonging, Part 1

Reading

Akinwumi Ogundiran, *The Yorùbá: A New History*

Week 7 (10/22): Groupwork and Belonging, Part 2

Reading

David L. Schoenbrun, *The Names of the Python: Belonging in East Africa, 900 to 1930*

Week 8 (10/29): West Africa and the Atlantic World, Part 1

Reading

Colleen Kriger, *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast*

Week 9 (11/5): West Africa and the Atlantic World, Part 2

Reading

Ndubueze L. Mbah, *Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age*

Week 10 (11/12): The Archaeology of Urbanism in Early Africa, Part 1

Reading

Freud, B. 2007. *The African City: A History*, chapter 1

Roderick McIntosh, "Different cities: Jenne-jeno and African urbanism." *The Cambridge World History* 3 (2015): 364-80.

Selections from *The Swahili World* edited by Stephanie Wynn-Jones and Adria LaViolette

Shadreck Chirikure, "Shades of Urbanism (s) and Urbanity in Pre-Colonial Africa: Towards Afro-Centred Interventions." *Journal of Urban Archaeology* 1 (2020): 49-66.

Week 11 (11/19): The Archaeology of Urbanism in Early Africa, Part 2

Reading

TBA

Week 12 (11/26): No Class - Thanksgiving

Part 3: Regional Syntheses and Teaching Early Africa

Week 13 (12/3): Teaching Early Africa in the Undergraduate Classroom, Part 1

Reading
TBA

Week 14 (12/10): Teaching Early Africa in the Undergraduate Classroom, Part 1

Reading
TBA

Diversity & Inclusion Statement

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.

Academic Integrity Statement

By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but is not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.