African History: Precolonial Times to 1800
HIST 261-001, Spring 2015
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9-10:15 am, Planetary 120

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Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30-2:30 pm, or by appointment

Course Description:
From the creation of a new nation state in South Sudan to the continuation of warfare in the eastern Congo, it can appear as if contemporary Africa is home to constant political and social upheaval. In this survey of African history, students will examine the historical background to debates such as those over African identity and underdevelopment that continue to shape our perceptions of the continent today. This course is designed to introduce students to the social, political, economic, and cultural history of sub-Saharan Africa from the earliest times to the early nineteenth century. Students will gain an overview of some of the most significant developments of the African past, including early state building, the growing influence of Islam and Christianity, and the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Africa will be presented as continent at the crossroads of global interactions, at the center for struggles over identity, and the home of breathtaking works of art, spirited communities, and incredible natural wonders.

To accomplish these aims, we will also study how historians and other scholars approach this history. We will examine how we can use archeological evidence, oral traditions, and written documents to understand historical developments on the continent. Written assignments will focus on helping us make sense of these diverse sources. On Tuesdays, the professor will provide an historical overview in a mixture of lecture and discussion format and on Thursdays, students will be expected to share their reactions to the week’s readings. By the end of the semester, students will be able to describe the major events and influences that shaped the early history of Africa and link these developments to challenges that face modern Africa.

Course Objectives:
1. Students will gain a better understanding of the history and culture of Africa.
2. To note how aspects of African societies – including identity, religion, gender relations, and state formations – changed over time.
3. Students will learn how to analyze and think critically about a variety of sources – including oral histories, archeological data, and written sources – to make sense of the history of Africa.
4. Students will gain an appreciation of the diversity of African communities and experiences from an African perspective.
Grading and expectations:

Participation: This class is participatory and, in order to get the most from class, you need to attend every class prepared and having thought about the assigned reading(s). If you have poor class participation due to absences – i.e., your non-presence during discussions – your final grade will fall dramatically. In other words, if you average a B on assignments and exams but fail to participate consistently, your final mark will be a C. If you are absent for more than four classes (and do not provide an adequate excuse in a timely manner – i.e., notify the instructor after your second missed class), you will lose points from your class participation grade. Note: the instructor will not re-teach a missed class via email or during office hours.

Discussion Leading: During the semester, you will lead discussion once with another student. You will be responsible for spending between ten and fifteen minutes at the beginning of class presenting major themes and issues for discussion for the class. You will also provide the class with one or two discussion questions. You will be individually graded on the quality of your presentation.

Classroom Etiquette: You may not use cell phones, laptops, or any other electronic devices in the classroom unless they are being used for a classroom activity as indicated by the instructor. Please arrive on time and pack up your things only when the lecture or discussion has completely finished. Any violation of these rules will significantly lower your participation grade.

Reaction Papers: You will write short papers of 200-300 words answering the question(s) posted on blackboard. These papers are to be emailed to jhooper3@gmu.edu as a Word attachment before midnight on the Wednesday prior to class. You will receive a score of 3 (excellent), 2 (good), 1 (needs improvement), or 0 (does not respond to the question adequately) for each paper. You must provide proper citations for each paper or else you will lose points (see guide posted on course blackboard site). Out of 9 reaction papers listed on the syllabus, you will be graded on 8 of these papers (you can either choose to skip one paper or have the lowest reaction paper grade dropped at the end of the semester). Late reaction papers will not be accepted for any reason.

Short Papers: You will write three short papers throughout the semester. These papers will be 3-5 pages in length and necessitate the use of footnote citations. Separate guides for these assignments will be distributed later in the semester, as well as a grading rubric. These papers must be submitted in hard copy and an electronic copy must also be emailed before class. Late short papers will not be accepted without prior approval.

Mid-term and Final: These in-class exams will be comprehensive and deal with our readings, assignments, and discussions in class. The exams will test your ability to analyze historical data.
and not just focus on the memorization of dates and events, although you will be tested on this information as well. Guides will be distributed in advance of the exams.

**Exam Rules and Deadlines:** In accordance with university regulations, professors in the Department of History and Art History re-schedule exams after receiving documentation of a medical emergency or family emergency; often this documentation must be verified by the Dean of Student Life. **Work-related or personal/family obligations are not adequate excuses for re-scheduling an exam or obtaining any kind of extension.** Note: January 27 is the last day to add classes or drop classes with no tuition penalty; February 10 the last day to drop with a 67% tuition penalty. If you have questions about registering for this class, please speak with your academic advisor.

**Final Grade:**
- Participation - 10% (based on the quantity and quality of your contributions)
- Discussion leading – 5%
- Reaction Papers (8 total) - 15%
- Short papers (3 total) - 20%
- Mid-term - 20%
- Final - 30%

**Office of Disability Services:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS. See [http://ods.gmu.edu](http://ods.gmu.edu).

**Note about Communications:** Students must use their Mason email account to receive important University information. Blackboard will be used to post important messages, links for readings, and grades for papers.

**Other Important Campus Resources:**
- The Writing Center: Robinson A114, [http://writingcenter.gmu.edu](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu)
- University Libraries: [http://library.gmu.edu](http://library.gmu.edu)
- Counseling and Psychological Services: 703-993-2380, [http://caps.gmu.edu](http://caps.gmu.edu)

**Academic Honesty:** Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another source without giving that source credit. Writers give credit through the use of accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes; a simple listing of books, articles, and websites is not sufficient. Plagiarism cannot be tolerated in an academic setting.

Student writers are often confused as to what should be cited. Some think that only direct quotations need to be credited; this is incorrect. While direct quotations do need citations, so do
paraphrases and summaries of opinions or factual information formerly unknown to the writers or which the writers did not discover themselves. Exceptions to this rule include factual information which can be obtained from a variety of sources—what has been called common knowledge—or the writers' own insights or findings from their own field research. What constitutes common knowledge can sometimes be precarious; what is common knowledge for one audience may be so for another. In such situations, it is helpful to keep the reader in mind and to think of citations as being "reader friendly."

In other words, writers provide a citation for any piece of information that they think their readers might be unfamiliar with and want to investigate or debate further. Not only is this attitude considerate of readers, it will almost certainly ensure that writers will not be guilty of plagiarism.

Cheating means to get help on an assignment without permission. This includes asking another classmate to “see” their paper before writing your own paper OR hiring someone to “edit” your paper. Allowing another student to see your work without permission from the instructor is also considered cheating. You must get permission from your instructor before asking anyone outside of your professors, writing center tutors, or teaching assistants for help on assignments. If you don’t understand an assignment, you need to ask the professor for clarification rather than your classmates.

In this course, you will be expected to adhere to the Honor Code at George Mason. It is your responsibility to read and understand the policy (available at http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code/). We will discuss the use of citations and quotations throughout the semester. If you have any questions on how to cite a source, please see the professor or instructor.

Texts Available for Purchase through the Bookstore (also available via 2 hour reserve):


Alternate unabridged editions for *Sundiata, Chaka, and Things Fall Apart* are acceptable, but not electronic versions. All other readings on the syllabus are found in links given on blackboard or on course reserves. You are expected to bring a copy of assigned readings with you to class.
Course Schedule

*This schedule is subject to change. Please consult the course blackboard site for updated course information.

Introductions: Challenging Understandings of the Past

January 20: Introduction to the course and expectations

January 22: Defining Africa, spatially and temporally

Readings:
- *Africa in World History*, preface
- Taylor Mayol, “The BBC gets Rwanda Wrong,” *Africa is a Country Blog*, December 8, 2014. (link available on blackboard)

Suggested Reading:

Reaction paper #1 due
*Choose day for leading discussion

January 27: The African environment

Suggested Reading:
- *Africa in World History*, chapter 1

January 29: Humans shaping the African landscape

Reading:
  (available as an e-reserve via course blackboard site).

Reaction paper #2 due

February 3: Migrations, food, and settlement on the continent

Suggested Readings:
- *Africa in World History*, chapters 2, 3, and 4

February 5: Talking about African “tribes”

Reading:

Suggested Readings:
Reaction paper #3 due

**Isolation or Connection?**

**February 10:** Early history of northern and northeast Africa  
*Suggested Readings:*  
- *Africa in World History*, chapters 5 and 6

**February 12:** The place of Egypt in African History and the “Black Athena” debates  
*Readings:* (all available via links on blackboard)  
- Herodotus, *The Histories* (excerpt), c. 430 BCE  
- *The Periplus* (excerpt), 1st century CE  
- Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (excerpt), 1st century CE

Reaction paper #4 due

**February 17:** Islam in North Africa  
*Suggested Readings:*  
- *Africa in World History*, chapters 7 and 8

**February 19:** The challenges of interpreting oral history  
*Reading:*  
- *Sundiata.*

Short paper #1 due

**February 24:** Islam, trade, and the city states of East Africa  
*Suggested Reading:*  

**February 26:** Oral histories and origin stories in East Africa  
*Readings:* (both available via the GMU library catalog)  

Reaction paper #5 due

**March 3:** Review for midterm

**March 5:** Midterm exam

**March 10 and March 12:** Spring Break
European Intruders

March 17: Europeans on the West African coast – early encounters

*Suggested Reading:*
- David Northrup, *Africa’s Discovery of Europe: 1450-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-23. (available via e-reserve on the course blackboard site)

March 19: Religious encounters and material culture in West-central Africa

*Reading:*

*Reaction paper #6 due*

March 24: An overview of the trans-Atlantic slave trade

*Suggested Readings:*
- *Africa in World History*, chapters 9, 10, 12

March 26: West African enslavement from the eyes of Equiano

*Reading:*
- Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1790), pages TBA (book available online through the GMU library catalog).

*Reaction paper #7 due*

March 31: Central Africa in the context of the slave trade

*Suggested Readings:*
- *Africa in World History*, chapters 10 and 12

April 2: A story of East African enslavement

*Reading:*

*Reaction paper #8 due*

April 7: South Africa and encroaching colonialism

*Suggested Readings:*
- *Africa in World History*, chapter 13
April 9: Conflicting interpretations of Shaka Zulu

Reading:
- Mofolo, Chaka.

Short paper #2 due

Background to Conflict

April 14: Political formations in inter-lacustrine Africa

Suggested Readings:

April 16: Historical approaches to understanding conflict in contemporary Africa

Watch:
- Documentary on Rwandan Genocide (choose from a list of documentaries posted on blackboard, all available to watch online).

Reaction paper #9

April 21: Approaching colonization

Suggested Reading:
- Africa in World History, chapter 14.

April 23: The transformation of Africa

Reading:
- Achebe, Things fall apart.

Short paper #3 due

April 28: Reports on current events in Africa

Before class:
- Conduct a brief review of current events in Africa and be prepared to present and discuss them with the class (see guide on blackboard for further details).

April 30: Review and final reflections

Final Exam: during exam week