

# BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Department of History

History 237

## RECONSTRUCTING THE AFRICAN PAST

Dr. John Thornton

Meets: AAS 101 Tue, Thu 2-3:15 (at 138 Mountfort).

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Africa is the forgotten continent, rarely mentioned or discussed in any detail in survey courses or in the debates of world history. Many people, even in the popular media and educational institutions do not know that Africa even has a history before the very recent past. Yet, its history has been increasingly discovered and disclosed by over half a century of modern research, and exciting discoveries are made every day about the African past, before the advent of industrial globalism and European colonialism transformed the continent after the nineteenth century.

This class is a survey of the emerging themes of pre-colonial African history as revealed in on-going research. It will focus on historical methods used to uncover the African past, including the use of archaeology, oral traditions, and written documentation left by Africans and by outside travelers, as well as attempting to place African developments as we now understand them in the larger frame of human history.

### Requirements and Grading

I will host a discussion of the reading for each week through our page on Facebook. This will consist of my posting a question, and students will respond with a reaction and with interaction with other students. I am looking for posts or comments of at least 100 words. The Participation grade of 10% will be based on this section.

The basic class format will be lecture-discussion, with outside readings. Grades will be based on the following:

Mid-Term	30% (held on 17 October)
Term Paper	30% (due on 3 December)
Participation	10% (from Facebook)
Final Exam	30% (Wednesday, 17 December, 3-5)

The mid-term examination will consist of 3 identification questions (out of 5), worth

30% of the grade, a question devoted specifically to the reading up to that point in the course (10%) followed by a choice of one out of two essay questions worth 60% of the grade.

The final examination will be two essay questions drawn from your choice of four questions (40% each), and a question based on one of the readings used since the mid-term (20%).

The paper will be a 10-12 page (3,500-4,200 words) research paper. The topic of the paper will be open to any issue raised in the course, or that relates to any matter that took place in Africa before 1800, even if it was not explicitly discussed in class.

It is my intention that term papers be based on a thesis. That is, each student should consider a controversial question that the history of this region and time period raises and propose an answer to it. The paper will then be a defense of the answer or thesis, in which data are arrayed to show why the thesis is true.

All students should supply me with written notice of their paper topic and thesis, as well as a brief bibliography. Although this will not be graded, it can provide me with a vehicle for helping you and allowing you to get your thoughts together. For best results, you should submit this proposal to me on or before October 31st.

In order to submit this proposal, and the final paper, please send it as an e-mail attachment to [nkuwu1491@yahoo.com](mailto:nkuwu1491@yahoo.com). I would prefer that the paper be written in Word, or a program that can easily be converted to Word. I have generally not had trouble with RTF files, and with most Macs, but some have given me problems in the past. Please do not send PDF files, as these are hard to mark up on a computer.

If you have reasons to believe you cannot turn the paper in by its due date, inform me and discuss options. Late papers will be assessed a grade reduction of one third of a grade (ie an A becomes an A-) for each class sessions that the paper is late, but no paper will fail simply because of lateness. I expect each student to produce independent papers though I encourage students to discuss their ideas with each other and read and comment on each other's papers. Plagiarized papers will be dealt with according to the CAS Academic Conduct Code.

Students should attend all classes. If you must miss an examination or test inform me in advance, if possible. I expect all students to complete all work, so if you miss an exam, for any reason, schedule a make up session after discussing the absence with me.

## **Hub Learning Outcomes**

**Historical Consciousness:** The class will study the long term development of multiple African society over the period before 1800.

**Diversity, Civic Engagement, Global Citizenship:** Course material includes substantial material on multiple regions within Africa, as the continent has multiple cultures. Questions of exploitation, race, class and state formation will all be considered.

**Toolkit:** Students are expected to develop a major paper including the use of source material and its criticism. Varied sources of information are considered including non written and archaeological information.

## Course Texts

D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Longmans, 1995) [online].

## Course Outline and Reading Assignments

### Part I. Foundations

#### I. Introduction: Geography and Biology

#### II. Agriculture and Social Complexity

Read: Kathryn Bard, "Political Economies of Predynastic Egypt and the Formation of the Early State," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 25 (2017): 1-36

Letters of Harkhuf (from M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, (Berkeley 1973) vol. 1, pp. 23-27)

#### III. Nile Valley-Red Sea Civilizations, 3500 BC-500 CE

##### a. Egyptian Society and State

##### b. The Upper Nile Kingdoms

Read: Rodolfo Fattovich, "The Development of Ancient States in the Northern Horn of Africa, 3000 BC to AD 1000: An Archaeological Outline," *Journal of World Prehistory* 23 (2010): 145-175.

Piye's Victory Stele in *Fontes Historia Nubiorum* I, pp. 62-118.

#### IV. Complexity in Northeast and East Africa 1500 BC-1000 CE

##### a. From Punt to Axum

##### b. The East African Coast

Read: Stephanie Power, "In the Power of God Christ? Greek Inscriptional Evidence for the Anti-Arian Theology of Ethiopians First Christian King," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71 (2008): 93-110.

Strabo from. *Fontes Historia Nubiorum*

#### V. The West African Empires, 800-1500

##### a. Ghana, Mali, and Songhay

##### b. Kanem and Darfur

Read: D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Longmans, 1995)

Al-Bakri, al-'Umari and ibn Khaldun, Nehemiah Levtzion, *Corpus of Arabic Sources on West African History*

#### VI Central Sudan and Northeast Africa

Read: Merid W. Aregay, "Military Elites in Medieval Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian*

*Studies* 30 (1997)

“The Chronicle of Amda Tseon,” ed. R Pankhurst.

## **Part II. Classical Africa**

### VIII. Africa and the West, 1500-1800

a. European Expansion

b. Trade and Transformation in Africa

Read: John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 1998), pp 13-69.

Cadamosto’s account of Guinea, in Malyn Newitt, *The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415-1670* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 67-74.

### IX. Classical Africa: Upper Guinea

a. Islam and Power in Senegambia

b. Niger Basin in Turmoil

c. State and Power in the Central Sudan

Read: Boubacar Barry, “Senegambia from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century: Evolution of the Wolof, Sereer and Tukuloor,” in B. A. Ogot, ed. *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. 5, pp. 134-152.

Chambonneau, “Le Toubenon” excerpt translated by Kwasi Konadu.

### X Classical Africa: Lower Guinea

a. Emergence of Asante

b. Soldiers and Statesmen in Dahomey

c. Revolutionary Transformation in Benin

Read:

Paula Ben-Amos Girshick and John Thornton, “Civil War in the Kingdom of Benin, 1689-1721: Continuity or Political Change,” *Journal of African History* 42 (2001): 353-76.

Agaja of Dahomey to King George of England, in Robin Law, “Alternate Text of King Agaja of Dahomey’s Letter to King George I of England, 1726,” *History in Africa* 29 (2002): 257-271.

### XII Classical Africa: West Central Africa

a. Christianity and Politics in Kongo

b. The Portuguese Invasion and Ndongo

c. Emergence of Lunda

Read: Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641-1718* (Madison, 1983).

Correia Leitão’s description of eastern Angola and Lunda, 1756, from Eva Sebastyén and Jan Vansina, “Angola’s Eastern Hinterland in the 1750s: A Text Edition and Translation of Manoel Correia Leitao’s ‘Voyage’ (1755-1756),” *History in Africa* 26 (1999): 299-307; 330-352.

XIII. Classical Africa: Southern and Eastern Africa

- a. Portugal and Islam: The East African Coast
- b. Civil War and Portuguese Expansion in Southeast Africa
- c. Dutch Nomads and African Response in South Africa
- d. Jihad and Crusade in Ethiopia

Read: David N Beach, *The Shona and their Neighbours* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 68-111.

Remedius Prutky, *Travels in Ethiopia and Other Countries* (London, 1991), chapter