

**History 126 -- African Civilizations**  
Spring, 2009 Moravian College  
T TH 12:50-2:00 PM in Comenius 309

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Office hours: I will post my office hours on my web page and on my office door.

### Topics

This course will investigate sub-Saharan African civilizations through the study of African history, geography, and culture. Students will investigate African geography, human evolution in Africa; pre-colonial African lifestyles; ancient African kingdoms and empires; and early European and Islamic ties to Africa. It will also include discussions of the colonial period and independent Africa.

### Goals

- \*Students who successfully complete the course will be able to join civic and academic conversations about African history and society by discussing the main features of the topics listed above.
- \*Students will be able to discuss the ways that Americans have traditionally viewed Africa and ways to improve the interactions between Americans and Africans.
- \*Students will learn to apply cultural relativist perspectives to Africa.
- \*Students will gain experience in analyzing primary sources in African history, geography, and culture.

African history and civilization are often difficult for the westerner to understand. More significant even than the unfamiliar names is the fact that we are not used to studying societies that face the particular problems that Africa has faced and faces. The student must develop new ways of thinking by being sensitive to the possibilities of doing things another way. This is an exercise in sympathy as well as reason, and the most difficult obstacles to overcome are usually one's own parochialism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, gender bias, racism, and so forth.

The following quote by John Gardner (*No Easy Victories*, 165) illustrates the goals of this course:

You will never advance far in your understanding of another culture if you devote yourself to exclaiming that some things about it are wonderful and other things are terrible. This comes under the heading of entertainment and should not be confused with understanding. No society is all good or all bad, and the discovery that any particular society is compounded of both good and bad is not a very impressive finding. What you must try to do is to understand what problems a society faces; why it has developed the way it has; why it has certain characteristics rather than others; why it does some things so well and other things very badly.

### Texts

The books listed below serve as texts for the course. Additional readings will be assigned and put on reserve in the library.

- Gilbert, Erik and Jonathan T. Reynolds, *Africa in World History. From Prehistory to the Present* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (includes documents)
- Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
- D. T. Niane, *Sundiata, An Epic of Old Mali*
- Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*
- Keim, Curtis A., *Mistaking Africa. Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*

### Class

Reading assigned for a class is to be completed before that class. Reading the material before the class is essential for understanding and for useful discussions. I recommend reading both before and after class for the daily

assignments (i.e. not for the novels or the epic) and taking notes and outlining (rather than highlighting or underlining). I also recommend spending time at every study session quickly reviewing lecture and reading notes.

Students are encouraged to speak to me about academic or other subjects. Office hours will be announced and they are posted on my office door. You may also make an appointment. If you try to call me in my office and there is no answer during weekdays, let my phone ring for voice mail. Or, call me evenings or weekends at home. I am also on the network during most weekdays.

Participation in class is an important part of this course and of college education; attendance will be taken regularly and your speaking in class is encouraged.

## Evaluation

Evaluation will be based on a map quiz (10%), reading quizzes (7%, 7%, 7%), papers (10%, 10%, 15%, 15%, 15%, 4%).

Make-ups for quizzes or exams are given with great reluctance, and only when an arrangement has been made with me prior to the test or for verifiable emergencies. Late papers will be penalized. On paper assignments, some papers will be returned for rewriting.

Attendance does not receive a grade, but after two absences each absence will result in two points being subtracted from your final grade.

Plagiarism will be treated consistent with the *Student Handbook* and may result in failure in the course. As with all courses, you are expected to keep all notes and drafts until the final grade is assigned.

While I intend to follow the syllabus closely, it is sometimes helpful or necessary to change schedules, assignments, or evaluation procedures. Thus I reserve the right to do so.

Grading criteria on papers are as follows:

*TREATMENT OF SUBJECT:* The best papers show a full completion of the assignment, careful study and consideration of the topic, accurate information and citation, full development, originality, and ability to analyze and relate ideas. Weak papers tend to be incomplete, inaccurate, thin, and vague.

*ORGANIZATION:* In the best papers the logic of organization is always transparent so that the reader always knows what the task is and how the writer intends to accomplish it. A controlling thesis, stated at the outset, is systematically treated with arguments and support that always make sense. A weak paper tends to wander and get off the subject; it lacks a clear beginning, middle, and end.

*PARAGRAPHS:* Strong paragraphs are unified, coherent, and well developed. They have one controlling idea and give sufficient support to the idea to satisfy the reader that the subject has been adequately dealt with in an orderly fashion. Weak paragraphs lack a single controlling idea, tight structure, and full development.

*SENTENCES:* Strong sentences are clear in meaning, easy to read, varied in style, and linked to neighboring sentences to maintain continuity. Weak sentences tend to be uniformly flat, awkward or in primer style, unclear, and unconnected to neighboring sentences.

*WORDS:* The best words convey the exact meaning and unique voice of the author. Weak words are imprecise, inappropriate, and flat in style. A dictionary and thesaurus are essential tools of an author.

*GRAMMAR:* including spelling and punctuation: You can study or check accepted usage in grammar books and dictionaries.

*PROOFREADING AND PRESENTATION:* A velvet cushion or gold-embossed folder is unnecessary, and neither is a title page.

But pride in your work will be evident in how you take care of the mechanics of presentation.

Some matters of style:

Insert page numbers in the text when you use ideas or quotations from specific parts of the book -- like this: (52).

Quotations are acceptable as long as they are short and there are *specific* words or ideas expressed that are necessary for your analysis. If the specific words or ideas are not important, paraphrase or summarize. Integrate quotations into the text. For example, you could write: Achebe's character Okonkwo tried to excuse himself by saying, "xxxxxxxxxx."

(52) Remember to underline or italicize foreign words such as *chi*.

## Paper assignments

Note: You may turn in your work on recycled paper.

### 1. *Things Fall Apart*

Topic: Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* while in his late 20s. His father was a teacher in an Evangelical Protestant mission school in colonial Nigeria and his mother the director of a primary school. He attended university in Ibadan and traveled to Africa and the US in 1954. In the 1950s he worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Services and was in charge of the Voice of Nigeria by 1960. Thus by the time Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* he had been "out in the world" for a while and had many experiences that were not

“traditional.” So here is the question. Do you think that *Things Fall Apart* is more of an historical ethnography of the pre-colonial Igbo (i.e., “telling it like it was”) or more of an invented defense of pre-colonial Igbo life (i.e., “telling it like I want it to have been”) that was shaped so that Europeans in the late colonial period would be sympathetic to traditional Igbo life? Construct an essay that refers to specific events, people, and ideas in the novel that demonstrate your thesis. Please note that scholars disagree on the answer to this question. Thus I am not looking for a right answer so much as for a thoughtful answer that is well supported with detail from the novel.

Format: Your paper should be 600 - 900 words long, word processed, and double-spaced. If you need help after you have read your materials and reflected on them, I will be happy to talk to you about how to state a thesis or how to present your arguments.

## 2. *Juffure and James Island in the Late 1700s*

Topic: The readings that you are to write on are a collection of documents that pertain to the situation on the Gambia River in the late-18th century. These are among the few documents that survive concerning that time and place. When we read histories we usually do not realize that the data historians use are often as raw and limited as those in these documents.

Historians have to sort through such information and make sense of it. In this paper, however, I’m not interested in the *overall* sense that can be made (i.e., the story) so much as I am in the *value* of the sources. I would like you to analyze the sources. What can they tell really us? Which ones seem most trustworthy? Why? Which ones should we be wary of? Why?

Format: Same as *Things Fall Apart*.

## 3. *Gilbert and Reynolds* to March 24.

Topic: In this part of their book, Gilbert and Reynolds discuss African geography, traditional lifestyles, and pre-colonial kingdoms, states, city states, and empires. They demonstrate that the way that African societies evolved can be explained by geography, technology, local inventiveness, and outside influences. Your task is to write an essay that discusses these factors in the establishment and functioning of the major pre-colonial sub-Saharan African kingdoms, states, city states, and empires.

Format: Your paper should be about 1500 words (5 pages) long, word-processed, and double spaced. If you need help after you have read your materials and reflected on them, I will be happy to talk to you about how to state a thesis or how to present your arguments.

## 4. *Gilbert and Reynolds* to April 7.

Topic: Here we have three chapters, a film, and some documents that relate to the colonial period in Africa. The topics I would like you to discuss are why Europe was able to conquer Africa so easily and the character of the colonial period. Be sure you make specific references to events in Africa and to course materials.

Format: Same as for topic 3.

## 5. Final paper on May 6

Topic: In this final paper I would like you to discuss the following topics: How and why did Africa become independent? What have been the major challenges for modern African countries and how have they attempted to meet these challenges? Be sure you make specific references to events in Africa and to course materials.

Format: At least five pages word-processed and double-spaced.

## 6. Assessment essay on May 6

Topic: On the next to the last class I will give you an assignment that asks you to discuss how you relate the material in this course to that of other educational experiences. Your short essay will help me evaluate whether you are making connections between this course, which studies a topic foreign to most students, and the rest of your educational experience. I will grade the essay as on the following scale: 0: didn’t complete, 2.3: basic, 3.3: average/acceptable, and 4: exceptional.

The essay will also be used for an assessment project in which papers will be used anonymously. You will receive an informed consent form and be able to opt in or out of the assessment project.

## Schedule of classes

### January

20 Introduction

22 Myths About Africa

\*Keim, "How We Learn"

\*Keim, "The Origins of 'Darkest Africa'"

\*Keim, "'Our Living Ancestors': Twentieth-Century Evolutionism"

\*Keim, "Real Africa, Wise Africa"

27 Myths About Africa

**Reading Quiz** (7%)

\*Keim, "Cannibalism: No Accounting for Taste"

\*Keim, "Africans Live in Tribes, Don't They?"

\*Keim, "Safari: Beyond Our Wildest Dreams"

\*Keim, "Africa in Images"

\*Keim, "From Imagination to Dialogue"

29 The Evolution of Humans and Societies

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Africa and Human Origins," 4-14

\*Keim, "Race and Culture: The Same and the Other"

### February

3 The African Environment

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Physical Context," 15-36

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Settled Life: Food Production, Technology, and Migrations," 37-62

5 The Evolution of Humans and Societies

**Map Quiz** (10%)

10 Lineage Societies - Mazrui

\*Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

12 Lineage Societies

\*Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

17 Lineage Societies

\*Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

**Paper due** (10%) on *Things Fall Apart*

19 Centralized Societies - West Savanna

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "North and West Africa and the Spread of Islam," 95-96, 103-116

\*Niane, *Sundiata*

\*Niane, *Sundiata*

24 Centralized Societies - West Savanna

**Reading Quiz** (7%) on *Sundiata*

26 Centralized Societies - Central, East, and South

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "East Africa and the Advent of Islam," 117-135

### March (Spring Break)

10 Europe's Arrival in Tropical Africa

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Slavery and the Creation of the Atlantic World," 141-174

12 Slave Trade

**Paper** on *Juffure and James Island* (10%)

<sup>Blackboard</sup>\*Keim, ed., *Juffure and James Island in the Late 1700s*

17 Transition to Legitimate Trade in West Africa

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "West and West-Central Africa 1500-1800," 175-200

19 Centralized Societies - Central, East, and South

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Southern Africa: 1500-1870," 219-237

24 Centralized Societies

**Reading paper** on *Gilbert and Reynolds (kingdoms, states, and empires)* (15%)

26 Colonialism -- Conquest and Resistance

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Colonialism and African Resistance," 265-286

31 Colonialism -- Attitudes White Man's Country

### April

2 Colonialism -- Techniques

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Economic Change in Modern Africa: Forced Integration into the World System," 287-315

7	Colonialism <b>Reading paper</b> on <i>Gilbert and Reynolds</i> ( <i>colonialism</i> ) (15%)	*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Political Change in the Time of Colonialism," 316-341
9	Colonialism – Techniques	*Achebe, <i>No Longer at Ease</i>
14	Colonialism -- Changes in African Societies <b>Reading Quiz</b> (7%) on <i>No Longer at Ease</i>	*Achebe, <i>No Longer at Ease</i>
16	Independence	*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Politics in the Era of Decolonization and Independence," 363-393
21	Independence	*Keim, "We Should Help Them"
23	Independence - Mazrui	*Gilbert and Reynolds, "African Culture in the Modern World," 342-361
28	Independence	*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Contemporary Africa," 394-420
30	Independence - Conclusions	*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Photo Essay II: Crossing the Borders of African and World History," between pages 312 and 313
<b>Elective retake of map quiz</b>		
<i>May</i>		
6	<b>Final examination essay</b> ( <i>Independence</i> ) (15%) <b>Assessment essay</b> (4%)	

Here is the poem by William Butler Yeats from which Achebe took his title, *Things Fall Apart*.

### **The Second Coming**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouching toward Bethlehem to be born?