

History 126 -- African Civilizations

Fall, 2010 Moravian College

T TH 8:55-10:05 Comenius 309

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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 issues 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* (2nd ed.)

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 I encourage you to speak in class.

Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Mr. Joe Kempfer, Assistant Director of Learning Services for Disability Support, 1307 Main Street (extension 1510). Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the office of Learning Services.

Evaluation

Evaluation will be based on a map quiz (10%), reading quizzes (7%, 7%, 7%), papers (10%, 10%, 10%), participation (5%), and two examinations (17%, 17%).

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*.
- Some words to watch out for: who/that/whom/which; effect (n.)/affect (v.); number/amount; fewer/less

Paper assignments

1. *Things Fall Apart*

Topic: The John Gardner quotation above asserts that "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." Because we can't learn all there is to know about the Igbo in this course, we can't achieve Gardner's goals completely. Nonetheless, Achebe's novel allows us to begin to think about the characteristics of Umuofia and why these characteristics lead the Umuofians to do "some things so well and other things very badly." Write an essay that highlights major characteristics of Umuofia and discusses what you feel they do well and what they do badly.

Remember that strong essays analyze rather than summarize, provide reasons for judgments, and refer to specific events, people, and ideas to demonstrate a thesis.

Format: Your paper should be 600 - 900 words long, word processed, and double-spaced. You may turn in your work on recycled paper and it may be printed front and back. 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.

Your task is to report on how the slave trade operated in the Gambia River region in the late 18th century. In order to do this well you will need to i) have a thesis (“I argue that...”, ii) use as many of the documents as you can to support your thesis, iii) cite the documents as you use them (simply insert the name of the author or a short title in parentheses), iv) point out where documents agree or disagree and whether and why you agree with one point of view or another.

Format: Same as *Things Fall Apart*.

3. *No Longer at Ease*

Topic: This novel occupies a very important spot in our course. *Things Fall Apart* discussed the transition from a village society to a colonial society. *No Longer at Ease* discusses the transition from a colonial society where the village is still central to the lives of most Africans to a modern, urban, independent society. Both transitions bring conflict and confusion and both hold hope.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe presents many of the conflicts between traditional and modern cultures. Write an essay that discusses what Achebe is saying about those conflicts? What, in other words, is his point (or points)?

Once again, remember that strong essays analyze rather than summarize, provide reasons for judgments, and refer to specific events, people, and ideas to demonstrate a thesis.

Format: Same as *Things Fall Apart*.

Schedule of classes

August

30 Introduction

September

2 Myths About Africa

*Keim, “The Origins of ‘Darkest Africa’”

*Keim, “‘Our Living Ancestors’: Twentieth-Century Evolutionism”

*Keim, “Real Africa, Wise Africa”

*Keim, “Africa in Images”

7 Myths About Africa

*Keim, “Cannibalism: No Accounting for Taste”

Reading Quiz (7%)

*Keim, “Africans Live in Tribes, Don’t They?”

*Keim, “Safari: Beyond Our Wildest Dreams”

9 The Evolution of Humans and Societies

*Gilbert and Reynolds, “Africa and Human Origins,” 4-14

*Keim, “Race and Culture: The Same and the Other”

14 The African Environment

*Gilbert and Reynolds, “Physical Context,” 15-36

Reading Quiz (7%)

*Gilbert and Reynolds, “Settled Life: Food Production, Technology, and Migrations,” 37-62

16 Lineage Societies

*Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

- 21 The Evolution of Humans and Societies
Map Quiz (10%) *Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
- 23 Lineage Societies *Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
Paper due (10%) on *Things Fall Apart*
CONVOCAATION -- China
October
- 28 Centralized Societies - West Savanna *Gilbert and Reynolds, "North and West Africa and the Spread of Islam," 95-96, 103-116
 *Niane, *Sundiata*
- 30 Centralized Societies - West Savanna *Niane, *Sundiata*
Reading Quiz (7%) on *Sundiata*
(Midterm)
- 5 Centralized Societies - Central, East, and South
- 7 *Fall Break*
- 12 Europe's Arrival in Tropical Africa *Gilbert and Reynolds, "Slavery and the Creation of the Atlantic World," 141-174
 Blackboard
- 14 Slave Trade *Keim, ed., *Juffure and James Island in the Late 1700s*
Paper due on *Juffure and James Island* (10%)
- 19 Transition to Legitimate Trade in West Africa *Gilbert and Reynolds, "West and West-Central Africa 1500-1800," 175-200
- 21 **Midterm exam** (17%)
- 26 Centralized Societies - Central, East, and South *Gilbert and Reynolds, "Southern Africa: 1500-1870," 219-237
- 28 Colonialism – Conquest and Resistance *Gilbert and Reynolds, "Colonialism and African Resistance," 265-286
- November*
- 2 Colonialism -- Attitudes Watch video: "White Man's Country"
- 4 Colonialism -- Techniques *Gilbert and Reynolds, "Economic Change in Modern Africa: Forced Integration into the World System," 287-315
- 9 Colonialism *Gilbert and Reynolds, "Political Change in the Time of Colonialism," 316-341
- 11 Colonialism – Techniques *Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*
- 13 Colonialism -- Changes in Societies *Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*
Paper due on *No Longer at Ease* (10%)
- 16 Independence *Gilbert and Reynolds, "Politics in the Era of Decolonization and Independence," 363-393
- 18 Independence *Keim, "We Should Help Them"
- 23 Independence - Mazrui *Gilbert and Reynolds, "African Culture in the Modern World," 342-361
- 25 *Thanksgiving*
- 30 Independence *Gilbert and Reynolds, "Contemporary Africa," 394-420

December

2 Independence

*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Photo Essay II: Crossing the Borders of African and World History," between pages 312 and 313

7 Conclusions

*Keim, "From Imagination to Dialogue"

Final examination (17%)

The final examination will cover the material since the midterm.

Elective retake of map quiz

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?