

## **History 126 A and B -- African Civilizations**

Spring, 2012 Moravian College

Curtis Keim 610-861-1685 (office)  
610-865-3015 (home, evenings)  
ckeim@moravian.edu  
Office location: Comenius Hall 308  
Office hours: W 10:00-11:30; Th 1:00-3:30

### **Topics**

This course will investigate sub-Saharan African civilizations through the study of African history, geography, and culture. Students will investigate African environments, human evolution in Africa; pre-colonial African lifestyles; ancient African kingdoms and empires; and early European and Islamic ties to Africa. The course 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* (3rd 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* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)

## **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. I check my e-mail during most weekdays and usually, but not always, during evenings and weekends. 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.

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%), four out of five textbook reading quizzes (5%, 5%, 5%, 5%), two novel reading quizzes (5%, 5%); two papers (10%, 10%), participation (5%), and two examinations (17%, 18%).

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. A pattern of unexcused tardiness will negatively affect a student's grade, with one tardy equal to one third of a whole class absence.

Academic dishonesty 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 writing.

Some matters of style:

- Citations: Insert page numbers in the text when you use ideas or quotations from specific parts of a 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)

- Some words to watch out for: who/that/whom/which; effect (n.)/affect (v.); number/amount; fewer/less (look up "count nouns" in a grammar); it's (a contraction, not a possessive form).

## **Paper assignments**

### **1. *Sundiata. An Epic of Old Mali* (February 17)**

**Topic:** Sometimes oral histories are dismissed because we imagine they are as inaccurate as a message passed from person to person in the game of Whisper Down the Alley or Telephone. We are mistaken. Yes oral histories can be inaccurate, but they can't be dismissed as total fiction. The ruins of ancient Troy were discovered using information found in the *Iliad*. Much of the Hebrew Testament of the Bible was first passed down as oral literature. And again and again we have substantiated African oral histories by cross-referencing them with written histories or archaeological finds from the same period. Such histories are much more accurate than those of Whisper Down the Alley because they were told by professional historians who studied for years so they could repeat the stories verbatim.

*Sundiata* is an epic that has been memorized and told by griots (professional historians) for almost 800 years. Our version tells the story in prose form, but the griots actually tell the story using songs (verse) accompanied by a lute-like instrument called a *kora*, sometimes thought to be an ancestor of the banjo. Our version is relatively short, but when told by a griot the story takes many hours, usually spread over several days of performance.

Over time, different versions have arisen in different parts of what used to be Sundiata's empire of Mali. While individual incidents may vary considerably from griot to griot, the outline of the story is the same everywhere. For example, in our version Sundiata is born eight years after his brother and thus loses his immediate claim to the throne. In another version Sundiata is born first but temporarily loses his right to the throne because his brother's birth is wrongly announced first. Despite these differences, however, the point is the same:

Sundiata doesn't take control of Niani until after he has a number of adventures in other kingdoms.

Oral histories that are epics generally recount history in order to make a point about how to be a good person. I'd argue that the Sundiata epic has survived for almost eight centuries not because of its telling of history, but because it is a great story that illustrates how to be a good person in Malinke society.

This leads us to the topic that I'd like you to write about. *What does the Sundiata epic tell us about how to be a good person in Malinke society?*

Pay attention to the criteria for grading above and especially to "organization." Strong essays have a clear thesis ("I argue that..."), clear support for the thesis, and a clear end. Also be sure to provide specific references from the epic (with page numbers) that support and illustrate your arguments.

Format: Your paper should be at least 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.

Help: If you need help after you have read the epic and reflected on it, 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* (March 2)

Topic:

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. We also don't consider that there are many interesting questions that we simply cannot answer because there are no relevant documents for these topics.

For this paper, you are the historian and these are your raw data for an article on the Gambia River in the 18<sup>th</sup> century you have been commissioned to write for a magazine that publishes history for popular audiences. Fashion a good story, but be true to the sources; your piece should be history not historical fiction. I also expect you to include materials from all or nearly all of these sources. If it helps, you may also use the relevant material in our *Africa in World History* textbook.

Pay attention to the criteria for grading above and especially to "organization." Strong essays have a clear thesis ("I argue that..." or, for a popular audience, perhaps "My main point is that..."), clear support for the thesis, and a clear end. Also be sure to provide specific references to the documents that support and illustrate your arguments.

Format: Your paper should be at least 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.

Help: If you need help after you have read the 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.

## Schedule of classes

### *January*

18 Introduction

20 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"

25 Myths About Africa-

**Reading Quiz**

- 27 The African Environment  
The Evolution of Humans and Societies

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

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

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

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Physical Context of African History," 4-13

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Africa and Human Origins," 14-24

**February**

- 1 Environment, Technology, Food, and Culture (Foraging and Farming)

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Finding Food and Talking about It: The First 100,000 Years," 25-39

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Settled Life: Food Production, Technology, and Migrations," 40-66

**Reading Quiz**

- 3 The Evolution of Societies-  
(emphasis on lineage societies)

**Map Quiz**

- 8 Small-Scale Lineage-Based Societies  
10 Small-Scale Lineage-Based Societies-  
**Novel Quiz:** *Things Fall Apart*  
15 The Evolution of Societies  
(emphasis on centralized societies of the Western Savanna)

\*Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

\*Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "North and West Africa and the Spread of Islam," 98-99, 105-119 (note: only a portion of this chapter)

\*Niane, *Sundiata*

\*Niane, *Sundiata*

- 17 Centralized Societies - West Savanna-  
**Paper** on *Sundiata*

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "East Africa and the Advent of Islam," 120-138

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Southern Africa, 1500-1870," 241-255 (note: only a portion of this chapter)

24 **Midterm exam**

- 29 Europe's Arrival in Tropical Africa

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Slavery and the Creation of the Atlantic World," 143-174

**March**

- 2 Slave Trade-  
**Paper** on *Juffure and James Island*  
7 *Spring break*  
9 *Spring break*  
14 Transition to Legitimate Trade  
in West Africa  
16 Colonialism – Conquest and Resistance

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

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "West and West-Central Africa 1500-1800," 175-198

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Southern Africa, 1500-1870," 255-261

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Colonialism and African Resistance," 262-285

Watch video: "White Man's Country"

**Reading Quiz**

- 21 Colonialism -- Attitudes

23 Colonialism -- Techniques

28 Colonialism-- Techniques

**Reading Quiz**

30 Colonialism -- Changes in Societies-

**Novel Quiz:** *No Longer at Ease*

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Economic Change in Modern Africa: Forced Integration into the World System," 286-313 (but not the cartographic essay)

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Political Change in the Time of Colonialism," 314-338

\*Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*

\*Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*

**April**

4 Independence

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Politics in the Era of Decolonization and Independence," 360-387

6 *Easter break*

11 Independence

13 Independence

18 Independence-

\*Keim, "We Should Help Them"

Video by Ali Mazrui

Blackboard\*Ferdinand Okwaro, "Ritual Healing and Modernity in Western Kenya," *VEN (Viennese Ethnomedicine Newsletter)*, 8, 2-3 (Spring/Summer 2011), 5-13.

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "African Culture in the Modern World," 339-359

\*Gilbert and Reynolds, "Contemporary Africa," 388-415

20 Independence

**Reading Quiz**

25 Independence

27 Conclusions

**May**

3/4 **Final examination**

The final examination will cover the material since the midterm.

Only the highest grade counts.

**Elective retake of map quiz**

Here is the poem by William Butler Yeats from which Achebe took a title:

### **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?