**Hist 315: Environmental History of Africa**

**Professor Meredith McKittrick**

**Spring 2017**

Office hours: Mon. 10-10:30, Tues. 9:30-10:30 and by appointment, ICC 608

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**Introduction**

This class explores aspects of Africa’s history that might be covered in any other African history class – colonialism, gender, economic development, politics – but does so while placing the natural world at the center of our analysis. We will explore how what we commonly call the “environment” – the non-human world, in essence – can enhance our understanding of Africa’s past, as well as the limitations of using an environmental lens.

Along the way, we will consider the perennial question of sources: how do we know what we know? What information eludes us and why? Are historical sources for studying the environment different from those we use to study other aspects of history? And we will think about epistemologies: Can what we call the natural world really be regarded as something separate from the human world? And what are the problems with applying a framework grounded in western science to societies that have not historically shared that framework? What do we do with African ecological frameworks such as ideas about rainmaking? This is not about dealing in “truth” versus “belief.” As we will see, there is a long history of incorrect “scientific” assessments of Africa’s environments that were grounded in European beliefs and assumptions.

Because many of these misperceptions of African environments continue to shape popular views and even policy outside of Africa (and within Africa as well), this class will also consider the present. Contemporary environmental imaginaries of Africa are powerful – but also contradictory: primitive/underdeveloped jungle or barren desert; uniquely filled with nasty diseases or uniquely suited to large, wild animals; full of impoverished people who have less ability to control or shape their environment than “we” do and yet also full of people who are uniquely reckless with their natural resources; a place of vast nonhuman spaces yet also a place of human overpopulation. These ideas have very deep roots, as we will see. To the extent that any of them are true, their truth must be located in historical processes that have made them so, not in immutable qualities of the “natural” world.

In order to do that, we are going to have to learn something about that non-human world. Many of us, products of urban and suburban environments, don’t think much about dirt, microorganisms, and vegetation in our daily lives. How can we understand these entities as historical actants? Most of us share a cultural milieu in which we perceive ourselves to be rather divorced from the natural world, except perhaps in our recreational pursuits or in our experiences of extreme weather events. This class may prompt you to rethink some of those perceptions as well.

So here, in a nutshell, are the course goals. In this class, your ability to do the following will improve:

* To consider the relationship between human and non-human factors in shaping the course of the past.
* To read secondary sources critically, and to understand how historians engage in conversation with each other.
* To consider multiple perspectives on a past event – and to understand why they might be different.
* To identify and assess the primary sources historians use to interpret the past.
* To locate and analyze primary sources and secondary literature on your own.
* To make and support your own arguments both verbally and in writing, and to cite your sources properly.
* To think critically about the relationship between human history and what we often term “natural” history.

**Assignments:**

The reading and assignments for this class are aimed at achieving the course goals.

1. Participation: 15%. This includes materials you are asked to bring to class and leading discussion with a partner one week (weeks 4-12)
2. Short reflections, 8 of 11 assigned, 25%
3. Travel narrative (primary source) analysis, 5-7 pp.: 15%
4. Research proposal, 45%, divided as follows:
   1. Biophysical environment report, 10%
   2. Historical background, 10%
   3. Final proposal, 25%

Details of these assignments are on Canvas.

**What is expected of you in this course:**

* According to the Georgetown Undergraduate Bulletin, students should study at least six hours per 3-credit course each week. This class should require just about six hours a week of your time when you combine time spent reading, writing responses, preparing for discussion, and working on written assignments.
* You are expected to come to discussion ready to talk: to engage with the readings and your classmates’ comments. You are limited to one excused absence without documentation from the university.
* You are expected to turn in assignments on time. Late papers will be deducted 1/3 letter grade for each day they are late; I will not give credit for late reflection papers.
* You are expected to follow the protocols of academic honesty and correctly cite your sources.
* If you believe you have a disability, you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) for further information. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.
* Georgetown University and its faculty are committed to supporting survivors of sexual misconduct, harassment, or assault. University policy requires faculty members to report any disclosures about sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator, whose role it is to coordinate the University’s response to sexual misconduct.

**Required readings:**

* Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past: Environmental Histories of the Central African Rain Forest* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 2002).
* Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).
* Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement* (New York: Lantern Books 2006).
* James McCann*, Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann 1999).
* Richard Schroeder, *Shady Practices: Agroforestry and Gender Politics in the Gambia* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999).

If you have no familiarity with African history, you should also consult, as needed:

John Parker and Richard Rathbone, *African History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), which is available electronically through Lauinger (and, summarizing all of African history in 144 pages, is indeed short).

**Other resources:**

*On library reserve:*

Erik Millstone and Tim Lang, *The Atlas of Food: Who eats what, where and why*

Jason Clay, *World Agriculture and the Environment*

*Online:*

Soil maps: <http://eusoils.jrc.ec.europa.eu/Library/Maps/Africa_Atlas/Download/134.pdf>

<http://eusoils.jrc.ec.europa.eu/content/soil-map-soil-atlas-africa#tabs-0-description=2>

Climate:

http://climate.nasa.gov/climate\_resource\_center/interactives <http://www.cgdev.org/page/mapping-impacts-climate-change>

<https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cdo-web/>

<http://sealevel.climatecentral.org/>

Vegetation:

<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/GlobalMaps/view.php?d1=TRMM_3B43M&d2=MOD13A2_M_NDVI>

**Course schedule**

*Week 1: Introduction: What is environmental history?*

Jan. 17 Reading:

* Before class: Whence Cecil the Lion? Surf for news coverage about Cecil and bring the most interesting articles to class.
* http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-cecil-lion-palmer-zimbabwe-peta-planned-parenthood-abortion-perspec-0731-jm-20150730-story.html
* Read in class: Binyavanga Wainaina, “How to Write About Africa, ” *Granta* 92 (Winter 2005):<http://www.granta.com/Archive/92/How-to-Write-about-Africa/Page-1>
* View in class:Taylor Swift, “Wildest Dreams” video
* … and some maps

*Week 2: Imagining environmental pasts and environmental futures*

Jan. 24 Reading:

* <http://maps.nationalgeographic.com/maps/atlas/africa-human-footprint.html>
* Robert Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *Atlantic* Feb. 1994: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/
* Betsy Hartmann, “Population, Environment, and Security: A New Trinity,” *Environment and Urbanization* 10:2 (October 1998), 113-128.(Canvas)
* Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, “Challenging Received Wisdom in Africa,” in Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey 1996), pp. 1-33. (Canvas)
* Hoben, Kaplan, and Matthews on the Ethiopian famine, *The New Republic,* 21 Jan. 1985, pp. 17-25. (Canvas)

**Reflection paper #1: Viewing Africa from above and from below.** Go to Google Earth and have some fun. Pick two places within the African continent that are quite different from each other, and zoom in. What do you see from above? Save the image at any scale you wish. Now get some names of manmade or natural features in the area you’ve chosen and image search them. Make a note of when (month and year) the Google earth or photographic images were taken, if you can tell. Write a 2 to 3-page reflection paper on the following (you may attach images if you like) What information can you glean about this environment? What questions are you left with? What would it take to answer them?

**Mini-lecture:** Deep pasts

*Week 3: Frameworks for Environmental History*

Jan. 31 Reading:

* Fernandez-Armesto, *Civilizations,* excerpt (Canvas)
* Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* Chs. 5, 9, 19 (Canvas)
* John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent,* Chs. 1 and 5 (Canvas)
* James McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land,* pp. 1-54.
* Paul Landau, “When Rain Falls: Rainmaking and Community in a Tswana Village c 1870 to Recent Times,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26:1 (1993), pp. 1-30. (Canvas)

**Reflection paper #2: Reading the environment as a historical artifact**

Go for a walk in Rock Creek Park or along the C&O Canal, upstream from Georgetown, or some other place that is a protected natural area. Go with classmates if you want, but take some time to observe in silence as well. Dress warmly! Observe your surroundings and think about the following: What do you see in this environment? (Make a list!) How might what you see be related to human history? Are there any ways that this place sits outside of human history? What historical questions does this specific place raise for you? Write a 2- to 3-page reflection paper and be ready to share your observations with the class. Take some photos to share if you want – you can email them to me and we’ll view in class.

**Mini-lecture:** Entangled pasts and global connections

\*\* Choose a travel narrative from the list on Canvas, and get a copy of it. You’ll need it in a week or so.

*Week 4: (Hi)stories of the African environment*

Discussion leaders:

Feb. 7 Reading:

* Leroy Vail, “Ecology and History: The Example of Eastern Zambia,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 3:2 (April 1977), 129-155. (Canvas)
* Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika 1850-1950* (Athens: Ohio University Press 1996 (first ed. 1977), pp. 69-79, summary 160, and 161-179. (Canvas)
* James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, “Rethinking the Forest-Savanna Mosaic,” in Leach and Mearns, *Lie of the Land,* pp. 105-121. (Canvas)
* James McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land,* pp. 109-172.

View: “Second Nature”

**Reflection paper #3: Popular portrayals of African environments**

Find an article on Africa’s environment or ecology from the last ten years, taken from the mainstream media (not a scientific journal). Write a 1- to 2-page reflection on how your article does or does not follow the to do list offered by Binyavanga Wainaina. Does it invoke any Kaplanesque imagery? Does its story have similarities to any of the stories in the readings for this week? (Attach the article to your paper.)

**Mini-lecture:** The exploration of Africa

*Week 5: Wilderness: Europeans encounter Africa*

Discussion leaders:

Feb. 14 reading:

* John MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation, and British Imperialism* (Manchester UP 1988), Chs. 3 and 4 (Canvas)
* Adams, W. (2003). "Nature and the Colonial Mind" in Adams W. and Mulligan, M. (eds.) Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era. Earthscan, London. (Canvas)
* Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa* (New York: W.W. Norton 1992), Chapters 1 and 3. (Canvas)

**Reflection paper #4: Outsiders encounter Africa**

Start reading your travel narrative. What environmental information does the author provide? What kinds of human communities does the author encounter, and how do they relate to their environment? Do any of these reflect the themes in this week’s (or previous week’s) readings? Write a 1- to 3-page reflection paper, and come to class ready to share what you have found so far. (If you have time, map where your person is going on Google Earth or maps and see what you learn.)

**Mini-lecture:** Africa’s Animal Pasts

*Week 6: Wildlife: Killing it, protecting it, selling it*

Discussion leaders:

Feb. 21 reading:

* MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature,* Ch. 8. (Canvas)
* Adams and McShane, *Myth of Wild Africa* Chapter 4. (Canvas)
* Roderick Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2002), Chs. 4 and 5. (Canvas)
* Elisabeth Garland, “The Elephant in the Room: Confronting the Colonial Character of Wildlife Conservation in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 51:3 (Dec. 2008), 51-74.
* Maano Ramutsindela and Medupi Shabangu, “Conditioned by Neoliberalism: A reassessment of land claim resolutions in the Kruger National Park,” in George Barrett et al, eds., *The Changing Face of Land and Conservation in Postcolonial Africa* Routledge 2015), 109-124 OR “’Model Tribes’ and Iconic Conservationists? Tracking the Makuleke Restitution Case in Kruger National Park,” in Cherryl Walker et al, *Land, Memory, Reconstruction, and Justice* (Ohio University Press 2010). (Canvas)

View: “Africa: The Serengeti”(2011)

**Assignment for class:** Finish reading your travel narrative, and plot the author’s route on a map as well as you can. Go back to Google Earth and see what these places look like today. Google for more information as you feel you need to. Come to class ready to talk about what you find.

**Mini-lecture:** Colonial conquest

**Due in Canvas Feb. 25, 5 pm:** Analysis of your travel narrative as a source of environmental history (see instructions on Canvas).

*Week 7: Disease: The case of sleeping sickness*

Discussion leaders:

Feb. 28 reading (one of these will be eliminated):

* James Giblin. “The Precolonial Politics of Disease Control in the Lowlands of Northern Tanzania,” in Gregory Maddox, James Giblin, and Isaria Kimambo, *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania* (Athens: Ohio University Press 1996), pp. 127-151. (Canvas)
* Richard Waller, “Tsetse Fly in Narok, Kenya,” *Journal of African History* 31 (1990), pp. 81-101. (JStor)
* Maryinez Lyons, *The Colonial Disease: A social history of sleeping sickness in northern Zaire, 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1992), Chs. 7 and 10. (Canvas)
* Luise White, “Blood, Bugs, and Archives: Debates over Sleeping-Sickness Control in Colonial Northern Rhodesia, 1931-1939,” *Speaking With Vampires,* 208-241. (Canvas)
* Go to JStor and search for “sleeping sickness” in the title and “tsetse” in full text. Find an article from before 1920, post which one you are reading in the weekly file (no repeats!) and read it. What are the main concerns? What are the theories about sleeping sickness? What do they know they do not know?
* <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/national/science/health/052100drug-merchants.html>
* <http://www.who.int/trypanosomiasis_african/country/foci_AFRO/en/>

**Reflection paper #5:** Write about two pages on any aspect of this week’s readings that interest you.

**Mini-lecture:** Southern Africa’s history

**Spring break: March 7**

*Week 8: Environmental history in a settler society*

Discussion leaders:

March 14 reading:

* Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice,* all

**Reflection paper #6:** In about two pages, discuss the extent to which the biophysical world does or does not shape the history of Kuruman.

**Mini-lecture:** Africa’s hydroscapes and hydrological history

*Week 9: Water*

Discussion leaders:

March 21 reading:

* Joann McGregor, “Living with the River” (Canvas)
* Adams, *Wasting the Rain,* excerpt
* World Commission on Dams report, excerpt
* An article on Akosombo Dam in Ghana (Volta River Project) and possibly Kariba
* An article on rainmaking

View: Darwin’s Nightmare

**Mini-lecture:** Resource extraction and conservation

*Week 10: Environmental history in an equatorial forest*

Discussion leaders:

March 28 reading:

* Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past,* all

**Reflection paper #7**: In about two pages, discuss one way that Giles-Vernick’s approach to environmental history differs from Jacob’s.

**Mini-lecture:** Climate change

*Week 11: Drylands, droughts, and deserts*

Discussion leaders:

April 4 reading:

* Jule Charney, “Dynamics of Deserts and Drought in the Sahel,” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society* 101 (1975), 193-202. (Canvas)
* Earl Scott, *Life Before the Drought,* excerpt
* Jeremy Swift, “Desertification: Narratives, Winners and Losers” (Canvas)
* Michael Mortimer, *Roots in the African Dust,* excerpt
* “The Root Causes of the Sahel Drought” (Canvas)

View: “The Desert Doesn’t Bloom Here Anymore”

**Reflection paper #8:** In about two pages, discuss some aspect of the differing views of drought or desertification presented in these readings. Why are analyses of causation so different?

**Mini-lecture:** The Green Revolution, Structural Adjustment, and Africa’s agriculture after independence

**Due by 11:59 pm Friday, April 7:** Biophysical analysis of your chosen research site (see instructions on Canvas)

*Week 12: Development and the environment*

Discussion leaders:

April 11 reading:

* Schroeder, *Shady Practices,* all.

View: “Maragoli”

**Reflection paper #9:**  In two pages or so, tell me if can you imagine a better way that “development” might have turned out in this part of Gambia. If so, what would have had to be different? If not, why not – and would it have been better to have no aid projects here?

**Mini-lecture:** Urbanization and new scrambles

*Week 13:*

April 18 No class.

View Black Gold on your own time

**Reflection paper #10**

Take another walk! This time, pop into a grocery store, eat at a restaurant, or go into your dining hall and look at the offerings. Where does all this stuff come from and what human-environmental connections are suggested by its presence in an urban context? Then consult the food atlas and encyclopedia of world agriculture on reserve in the library. What questions about African agriculture – either the production of food for subsistence or of commodities for export - come to mind? Write a 2-3 page reflection and come to class ready to share your thoughts.

*Week 14: Sustainable futures?*

April 25 reading:

* Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement*
* Either Susanne Freidberg, "Cleaning up down South: supermarkets, ethical trade, and African horticulture," *Social and Cultural Geography* 4, 1 (2003), 27-43, OR Susanne Freidberg, "Gardening on the edge: The social conditions of unsustainability on an African urban periphery," *Annals of the* *Association of American Geographers*, 91, 2 (2001), 349-69.

**Reflection paper #11:** Write about two pages on something that most interested you from these readings.

**Due Friday April 28, 11:59 pm:** Historical analysis of your research site (see instructions on Canvas)

**Required during study days:** One on one meeting about your prospectus.

**Final prospectus due** Thursday, May 11 at noon