Part II, Historical Tripos: Paper 29
The History of Africa from 1800 to the Present Day

Convenor: Dr Ruth Watson (riw21@cam.ac.uk)

Course Description:
This paper explores the historical processes that have shaped the lives of Africans since 1800. It examines the internal and external dynamics of change in Africa from the beginning of the nineteenth century, while remaining sensitive to global perspectives on Africa’s place in the world. The paper draws together a variety of approaches to the African past and seeks to engage with important questions about historiography, but is also concerned with debates concerning historical sources and methodology.
Key themes and debates include:

- The nature and significance of pre-colonial states and societies with particular reference to the role of militarism, religion and economic development.
- The importance of slavery and the slave trades (particularly in West and East Africa) to African states and societies.
- The complex cultural processes through which millions of Africans converted to Christianity and Islam.
- The causes and processes of colonial conquest, the nature and forms of colonial resistance and the interactions between pre-existing political formations and colonial rule in the making of colonial states.
- The emergence of new forms of political community and identity around networks of ethnicity, gender, class and race in colonial and post-colonial Africa.
- The reshaping of the world of work by the rise of wage labour, especially migrant labour, and by the reorientation of agricultural labour towards cash crop production.
- The rise of new forms of education, of formal schooling and literacy, and the experiences and social roles of the new status groups brought into being.
- The social dynamics and politics of nationalism and decolonization and their influence on independent African states.
- Political and economic crises in independent Africa and the survival and coping strategies of Africans.
- Social unrest, violence and civil conflict in post-colonial Africa.

Mode of Teaching

The paper is structured chronologically. Lectures and classes in Michaelmas term focus on Africa in the nineteenth century while those in Lent term examine colonial and independent Africa during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A Revision class in the Easter term concentrates on debates in African history and historiography so as to draw together the themes of the paper. Students taking this paper are expected to attend all lectures and classes. There are 32 contact hours in all: sixteen 1hr lectures, four 90 mins discussion classes, and one 2hr revision class, as well as six 1hr supervisions for discussing weekly essays. If required, students also have the option of taking 1 or 2 additional one-hour revision supervisions in the Easter term. The paper convenor, Dr Watson, coordinates arrangements for supervisions by allocating students to supervisors. Students are taught one-to-one, in pairs or occasionally in groups of three. The paper is assessed by a three-hour exam in the Easter term.

Maximum supervision capacity: 20 students

Short Bibliography

General introductions to African history and discussions of historiography:

F. Cooper, Africa since 1940: the past of the present 2nd edn (2019)

J. Miller, ‘History and Africa/Africa and history’ American Historical Review 104 (1999), pp. 1-32

P. Nugent, Africa since independence: a comparative history (2nd ed, 2012)
R.J. Reid, A history of modern Africa: 1800 to the present (2nd ed, 2012)

See also: The Cambridge history of Africa and the UNESCO General history of Africa
Historically-informed novels:

Chinua Achebe, *Things fall apart* (on the run-up to colonization)
Chimamanda A. Adichie, *Half of a yellow sun* (on the Biafran war in Nigeria)
Mariama Ba, *So long a letter* (on women and Islam in Senegal)
Ayi Kwei Armah, *The beautiful ones are not yet born* (on post-colonial Ghana)
J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the barbarians* (on the frontier in colonial Africa)
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of darkness* (on colonial conquest)
Modikwe Dikobe, *The marabi dance* (on Johannesburg in the 1930s and 1940s)
Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous conditions* (on growing up in white-ruled Zimbabwe)
Buchi Emecheta, *The joys of motherhood* (on African women in colonial Nigeria)
Nurrudin Farah, *Gifts* (on Somalia in the 1980s)
Bessie Head, *A question of power* (on the psychological effects of apartheid)
Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo trilogy* (on an Egyptian family in the early 20th century)
Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka* (on Shaka Zulu in 19th-century southern Africa)
Ousmane Sembene, *God’s bits of wood* (on a railway strike in colonial Senegal)
Wole Soyinka, *Ake: the years of childhood* (on Soyinka’s childhood in colonial Nigeria)
Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *A grain of wheat* (on the Kenyan struggle for independence)