Course Description

African civilizations speak to us as much through monumental edifices, visual artifacts, sign systems, oral traditions, and films as they do through alphabetic texts. In their varied expressions, these societies, ancient and contemporary, present us with new ways of knowing. When we encounter these social imaginations through their multiple texts, the experience is reflexive, double-imaged, because of the complex interaction of the perceptions of Africa with the West’s own image of itself. Texts may include hieroglyphics, architectural symbolism, music, visual art, epics, folktales and proverbs, cosmologies and rituals, such as the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead; medieval Ghana and Mali through The Epic of Sundiata and other mythical works: the society of the Dogon and their extraordinary cosmology; Maryse Conde’s novel Segu; Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Condition, Manthia Diawara’s In Search of Africa, Robert Thompson’s Flash of the Spirit, Fu-Kiau’s African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo, and such films as Sembene’s Cèddo (Senegal); Lumumba: Death of A Prophet; and several others.

Course Objectives/Learning Goals

The course objectives are twofold: first, the development of academic skills; and second, the learning of specific cultural and historical knowledge. First, through the required written reading responses and exams, students will acquire the discipline to read texts and/or view films weekly. They will then learn how to analyze and interpret the intellectual, philosophical and artistic content of the text and/or film. Students will learn how to write a cogent and coherent series of questions or discussion points related to the important issues or topics raised in the assigned texts or films. Finally, these issues will be discussed in class leading to a more skilled ability to communicate verbally within a group context. In addition, group assignments will help students learn how to collaborate with others on scholarly projects.

Second, in terms of the acquisition of specific cultural and historical knowledge, students will learn about the depth and complexity of Africa’s ancient history and traditions. They will learn about the intricate diversity of ethnic groups, cultures and languages found on the African continent. Students will also learn about some of the differing African philosophies and religious traditions, both ancient and contemporary, that coexist today. Finally, students will learn about the different ways an African narrative can be produced and disseminated from texts written in ancient Pharonic Egyptian, to carefully shared oral knowledge controlled by elders, to contemporary film or videos made by African artists.
Course Requirements and Grading

Class Participation (30%) Reading the required texts and participating in class discussion are essential. All students must bring to each class reading responses, a typed sheet or sheets with four questions or discussion points that relate to the readings for that session. Students can vary the number of questions to discussion points, e.g., you can have two discussion points and two question, or all questions, or all discussion points, etc. The typed sheet of reading responses should have your name and the due date at the top, and should be turned in at the end of each class. Class discussion should be based on the readings and relate to specific texts.

Take-Home Midterm (30%) There will be a take-home midterm requiring students to write a six-page essay (double-spaced, 11 or 12 font size) on one of six propositions or questions. The midterm propositions or questions, all relating to the readings, will be provided on Monday, October 7 and will be due on Monday, October 21.

Verbal Presentation (10%) Each student will be required to make a 20-30 minute verbal presentation to the professor. The presentation can be based on a topic of their choice and can be supported by written notes. The point is to present a clear and concise discussion of the texts and the issues they present or don’t present, as the case may be. The scheduling of dates and time for the verbal exams will be discussed after the midterm exam.

Take-Home Final (30%) There will be a take-home final requiring students to write a ten-page essay (double-spaced, 11 or 12 font size) on a topic of their choice after approval by the professor. The topic must relate to the course readings and offer a developed discussion of their important issues. The take-home final is due on Monday, December 16.
Texts and Videos

Main Texts (NYU Bookstore)
1. Marcel Griaule, Conversations with Ogotemmeli.
2. Robert Farris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit.
5. Tsitì Dangarembga, Nervous Condition.

Main Text (On Reserve: Bobst Library)
1. Robert Farris Thompson, African Art in Motion. (See on-line PDF.)
2. K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo. (See on-line PDF.)

Videos (Bobst Library, Avery Fisher Center*)
1. Different but Equal. (VCA 5177)
2. African Art: The Legacy of Oppression. (VCA 10331)
4. Ceddo. (VCA 12228)
6. Lumumba: Death of A Prophet. (VCA 3487, DVD 17634)
7. Finzan. (VCA 2273, DVD 18587)
10. Bamako Sigi-Kan. (VCA 14898, DVD 11727)

*The videos should also be available on NYU Stream later in the semester.
Reading Packet

1. “Europe’s Africa” from Jan Nederveen Pieterse, White on Black.
5. Excerpts from The Book of the Dead, edited by Ogden Golet, and another version of the same text edited by Evelyn Rossiter.
8. Excerpt from The Invention of Africa by V. I. Mudimbe.
10. “Nok Terracottas” from Met Timeline Webpage.
12. Excerpt from Cultivating Humanity by Martha Nussbaum.
17. “Patrice Lumumba at the Crossroads of History and Myth” by Nyunda ya Rubango.
18. “Finzan.”

Reading Packet available at:

Advanced Copy Center, Inc.
552 Laguardia Place
(Between West 3rd Street and Bleecker Street)
New York, NY 10012
(212) 388-1001
Narratives of African Civilizations (IDSEM-UG1197-001)  Prof. C. Daniel Dawson
Fall 2013  Hum, 4 CR  Monday 3:30 – 6:10 pm
New York University,  Bldg: 25 West 4th Street,  Room: C-15
Office Hours: Monday 1:00 – 3:00,  1 Washington Place,  Room 622

Schedule of Readings, Videos and Assignments

Sept. 9:  Introduction to the Course.

Sept. 16:  Video:
Different but Equal. (VCA 5177, Volume 1, Program 1)
Readings:
“Europe’s Africa” by Jan Nederveen Pieterse, White on Black. (R.P. #1.)
“Introduction” from Martin Bernal, Black Athena (with a book review,
“History: The Colorized Version” by Greg Tate, Village Voice.) (R.P. # 2.)
“Two Philosophies of African History: Hegel and Diop” by L. Keita. (R.P. #3.)
“The Art of Ethnic Cleansing” by Clyde Taylor. (R.P. #4.)
Excerpts from The Book of the Dead, edited by Ogden Golet, and another version of the
same text edited by Evelyn Rossiter. (R.P. #5.)
“Egypt” from Art in the Ancient World. (R.P. #6)
“Introduction” to Intellectual Traditions of Pre-Colonial Africa by Constance
Hillard, and other excerpts form the same text: “The Resurrection of Osiris,”
Dispute of a Man with his Soul.” (R.P. #7.)

Sept. 23: Marcel Griaule, Conversations with Ogotemmeli.
Reading:
Excerpt form The Invention of Africa by V. I. Mudimbe. (R.P. #8.)

Sept. 30: Video:
African Art: The Legacy of Oppression. (VCA 10331)
Readings:
“African Arts” by Paul Bohannan. (R.P. #9.)
“Nok Terracottas.” (R.P. #10.)
“Teaching Third World Cinema” by Teshome Gabriel. (R.P. #11.)
Oct. 7: Robert Farris Thompson, Chapter 1, “African Art and Motion” from African Art in Motion. (On Reserve: Bobst Library and on-line in PDF form.)
Robert Farris Thompson, “Black Saints Go Marching In” from Flash of the Spirit.

Reading:
Excerpt from Cultivating Humanity by Martha Nussbaum. (R.P. #12.)

MID-TERM TAKE-HOME EXAM GIVEN OUT.

Oct. 14: Fall Break. Classes cancelled. (University offices remain open.)

Oct. 21: Video:
Keita: The Heritage of A Griot. (VCA 5304)

MID-TERM TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE.


Readings:
“Sundiata” from Companion to Literary Myth, Heroes and Archetypes. (R.P. #13.)
“The Living Tradition” by Amadou Hampâté Bâ. (R.P. #14.)
Reading: “The Mandingo Voyages” by Ivan Van Sertima in Early America Revisited. (R.P. #15.)
Robert Farris Thompson, “Round Houses and Rhythmized Textiles” from Flash of the Spirit.

Nov. 4: Maryse Conde, Segu.

Nov. 11: Videos:
Ceddo. (VCA 12228)
Sembene: The Making of African Cinema. (VCA 8221)

Reading:

Nov. 18: K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo. (On reserve in Bobst Library and on-line in PDF form.)
Robert Farris Thompson, Chapter 2, “The Sign of the Four Moments of the Sun” in Flash of the Spirit.

Video:
Lumumba: Death of A Prophet. (VCA 3487)

Reading:
“Patrice Lumumba at the Crossroads of History and Myth” by Nyunda ya Rubango. (R.P. #17.)

Nov. 25:  Tsitsi Dangarembaga, Nervous Condition.

Reading:
“The Colonial Order” by Chinweizu from The West and the Rest of Us.  
(R.P. #19.)

Video:
Finzan. (VCA 2273)

Reading:
“Finzan.” (R.P. #18.)

Dec. 2:  Video 1.:  
Repercussions: A Celebration of African American Music-The Drums of Dagbon. (VCA 1535, Part 3)  
Reading:

Video 2.:  
(VCA 1535, Part 3)  
Reading:

Dec. 9:  Manthia Diawara, In Search of Africa.

Video:
Bamako Sigi-Kan (VCA 14898)

Dec. 16:  CLASS PRESENTATIONS. FINAL PAPERS DUE.