

Princeton University Program in African Studies

Contemporary African Politics and Society: Ethnographic Interventions



Course Description

This course familiarizes students with current ethnography on postcolonial African politics and society. Firstly, we must comprehend that Africa's "place in the world" is a vital component in defining the experiences and trajectories of global events, both historical and contemporary, rather than a marginal or afterthought. The course aims to cultivate students' critical thinking, reading, and writing abilities in relation to African politics and society. This objective will be accomplished by highlighting the diversity, complexity, and heterogeneity of African thinking, practices and experiences, as well as the variety of local and global factors that exert influence on them or are impacted by them. By the end of the course, students will possess the critical thinking skills and analytical tools necessary to identify and refute reductionist and prejudiced narratives about Africa in addition to being able to construct their own well-informed and well-considered narratives and representations. We will also explore the notion that the current state of Africa serves as a forerunner to processes that arise in other parts of the world. Consequently, the continent is a fertile origin of theory, analysis, and practice related to contemporary global events. This course is available to all students who are interested in gaining knowledge about different facets of African political and social life, particularly in the postcolonial era.

Semester: Spring 2025

Course Number: AFS322-POL463-ANT222-AAS334_S2025

Meeting Times: Wednesday, 1:30 pm – 4:20 pm

Instructor: Melusi Nkomo, mn8973@princeton.edu

Office hours: Fridays 14:00 to 15:00 or by appointment. You are invited to sign up online and attend my Office Hours to address any inquiries you may have regarding the readings, assignments, or course policies. I would be delighted to meet with you in person or via Zoom. If you cannot attend my appointed office hours, please get in touch with me via email to arrange an alternative appointment time. This will facilitate my acquaintance with you and enable you to derive greater value from the course.

Seminar locations: TBD

Course description and Objectives

This course familiarizes students with current ethnography on postcolonial/post-independence African politics and society. Firstly, we must comprehend that Africa's "place in the world" is a vital component in defining the experiences and trajectories of global events, both historical and contemporary, rather than a marginal or afterthought.

Specifically, as a result of this course, students will be able to:

- Highlight the diversity, complexity, and heterogeneity of African thinking, practices and experiences, as well as the variety of local and global factors that exert influence on them or are impacted by them.
- Deconstruct writings on Africa to identify what questions the author asked, what data they used to answer their question, and how it is anthropological.
- Explain the aims and scope of ethnographic research, reading, thinking and writing about Africa Society and politics to both lay and professional audiences.
- Write an essay/ethnographic research question and design a research proposal outlining what type of data they would need to answer it and what research activities they would conduct to collect that data.
- Analyze ethnographic data and interpret trends therein.

Diversity and Inclusion Statement

The classroom is a welcoming and supportive environment where we all contribute to each other's learning. In the classroom, we strive to understand and value the diversity of humanity in all of its complexities and on its own terms. We commit to fostering an environment where we value and appreciate the viewpoints of our classmates and colleagues. We must be aware of how power differentials across various scales and settings influence human interaction. We will take the time to reflect on our individual positions in the classroom, acknowledging our different privileges and creating an inclusive environment for everyone. Throughout the semester, we will collaborate on the

course materials, supporting each other's learning journeys and embracing the rich diversity of identities among our fellow learners.

Accessibility and Accommodations

Princeton University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform the instructor early in the semester if you living with a disability or other conditions that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with the instructor after class or during office hours. For more information, please contact Princeton University's [Campus Life](#).

Course Policies

- Papers should be written in English double-spaced, using standard 12-point font, with 1-inch margins. The student's name, the paper's title, the date, the course's title, and page numbers must be mentioned.
- Quotations and bibliography must follow the Chicago Manual of Style or the Harvard Referencing System.
- Students must hand in papers on time electronically as a Word file (no need to provide hard copies). All deadlines in this course syllabus are definitive unless otherwise specified. Please submit work by the deadline to avoid a 1/3 letter grade penalty for each day it is late unless you have requested an extension from the instructor before the deadline (Printing issues, unexpected computer failures, and heavier-than-normal workloads are problems that do not require an extension). For severe illness or hospitalization, if you cannot meet the deadline after using your late pass, please submit an extension request to your college dean or assistant dean for studies. You must inform your college dean or assistant dean for studies that you have already received a 24-hour extension. All petitions for extensions must be submitted before the deadline.
- We will practice precise, critical interventions into scholarly discussions on African politics and society through discussions and written assignments. The course will provide opportunities for students to engage in the development of their ethnographic writing, reading, and critical thinking abilities. These skills are not only important in the academic field, but far beyond.
- Papers without clear links to the ethnographic (critical, literary, historical, anthropological, and sociological) approach proposed in the course: those that read like NGO policy reports or tabloid journalism, could be put at a disadvantage.
- Plagiarism violates academic integrity and will not be allowed. Students who submit others' work as their own will receive a failing grade. **The work submitted for this course must be original. Illicit collaboration is illegal, as is the use of ChatGPT or other AI composition software to write essays and arguments.** The restricted application of artificial intelligence exclusively for the purpose of rectifying English grammar—**rather than for the modification of ideas and arguments**—may be deemed tolerable.

- All the articles and book chapters listed in the course schedule will be provided as electronic reserves on CANVAS. Students are requested to thoroughly read the assigned materials and arrive to class well-prepared in order to facilitate a productive and meaningful conversation. All the articles and book chapters indicated in the course schedule will be made available as electronic reserve on the course site. Students are kindly requested to read them and come prepared for class to allow for a fruitful discussion.

Teaching

The course's teaching consists of a hybrid mix of lectures and class discussions (seminar style). The instructors will provide a brief synopsis of the theme for the week, which will be followed by discussions and reflections on the assigned primary readings, and other specified collaborative activities. The seminar discussions will include 3-5 minute reflections by each student on the readings, emphasizing issues for discussion, controversies, points for clarification, and comparisons between readings. One weekly session has been designated for the screening of a film, along with discussions, reflection, and analysis of the content, significance, narratives, and the film's contribution to our understanding of African politics and society. Students will also present on topics of their choice, and their peers will discuss and critique these presentations in a seminar-style setting. Every student must carefully read the prescribed readings for the week and actively participate in class discussions and Q&A sessions.

Assessment

It is expected of students to submit two papers (one for the midterm and one for the final exam), give one oral presentation, and take an active part in readings and discussions in class throughout the course. Attendance and active participation in class will contribute to 10% of the final grade. Students are required to deliver an individual oral presentation outlining their proposed project for the course, which will account for 20% of their final grade. This presentation should include a clear description of the *problematic*, whether theoretical or practical, as well as an explanation of the research questions. The outline will be disseminated to all participants one week prior to the presentation and colleagues offer critical remarks. The midterm paper is a written version of the outline, constituting 30% of the final assessment. The word limit for the submission is 1500 words, excluding references and appendices. The mid-term paper (outline) should set out the theme that will be further developed into the longer final term paper. The second assignment, which is the final term paper, must not exceed 3500 words (excluding references and appendices). It accounts for 40% of the final assessment and must be submitted by The paper is due by 11 pm on the Dean's Date, **Tuesday, May 6, 2025.**

Though not restricted to the subjects covered in-depth in the course and in the assigned readings, the topic selection should connect the argument to larger thematic and conceptual discussions in the course. In addition to the subjects specified in the course outline, students are encouraged to

explore other themes when choosing topics for their final grade essays, provided that they are relevant to the course (or as determined by discussion and agreement with the instructors).

Assignments	Description	Submission date	Weight
A) Oral presentation of project outline	Individual Presentation	Morning of Presentation	20%
A) Written mid-term Paper Outline	1500 words	Week 5 and Week 6	30%
B) Final Paper	3500 words	Tuesday, May 6, 2025	40%
D) Participation	Class attendance and active engagement	Continuous	10%
TOTAL			100%

Course Schedule

Week	Topics	Readings	Assignments
I	INTRODUCTION TO "AFRICA IN THE WORLD" + course introduction and organization	1) Wanaina, Binyavanga. 2005. "How to Write About Africa." <i>Granta</i> 92, https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/ 2) Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2008. "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience." <i>Transition</i> , 99: pp. 42-53.	Participation

2	<p>READING, WRITING, THINKING ON AND WITH AFRICA (‘Invention of Africa’) + How does Africa write and position itself in Contemporary World History + ‘Theory from the South’</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” <i>Public Culture</i> 14 (2002): 239–73 2) Kwame Appiah – <i>In my Father’s House</i> (“The Invention of Africa”: p.3 – 27) 3) Valentin-Yves Mudimbe – <i>The Invention of Africa</i> (“Discourse of Power and Knowledge”: p.1 - 23) <p>Additional (Optional) Readings</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4) <i>Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff - Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa</i> (“Theory from the South”: p.1 - 49) 5) <i>Paul Tiyambe Zeleza – “Of Ghettos and Academic Pimps”: p.391 - 395</i> 	Participation
3	<p>POLITICS, IDENTITY, ETHNICITY AND CITIZENSHIP + How do ethnic, identities, citizenship discourse and practices come to be? What are their political uses and misuses?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Mamdani, Mahmood <i>Define and Rule</i>. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Chapter 2, “Nativism: The Practice” pp. 43-85 and https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/invention-indig%C3%A8ne) 2) Archie Mafeje, “The Ideology of ‘Tribalism’”. <i>Journal of Modern African Studies</i>, vol. 9, No. 2. 1971 3) Carola Lentz, “‘Tribalism’ and Ethnicity in Africa: a review of four decades of Anglophone research”, <i>Cahiers des sciences humaines</i>, 31, 2 (1995) <p>Additional (Optional) Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Donald Donham - Violence in a Time of Liberation: Murder and Ethnicity at a South African Gold Mine, 1994</i> (“Introduction”: p. 1-10, Chapter 7 “Motives for Murder”: p.151-169 and “Conclusion”: p.186-188) 	Participation

4	<p>STATE, POWER, AND POLITICS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE AFRICA</p> <p>+ critically reading Africa's relations and position in the world.</p>	<p>1) Frederick Cooper – Africa Since 1940, The Past of the Present (“Introduction”: p.1 – 26”, “The Recurrent crises of the Gatekeeper State”: p .234 – 290),</p> <p>2) James Ferguson - Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order, (“Global shadows, Africa and the World”: p. 1-23 and “Of Mimicry and Membership, Africans and the ‘New world Society”: p.155 – 175).</p> <p>3) Jean-Francois Bayart, “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion” African Affairs, no. 99, April 2000</p> <p>Additional (Optional) Readings</p> <p>1) <i>Jackson, Robert H., “Quasi-states: sovereignty, international relations and the Third World”, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press</i></p>	Participation
5	<p>TUTORIAL</p> <p>+Debating and Discussion “Africa’s Position in the World”</p> <p>+STUDENTS’ PRESENTATIONS (Group I)</p> <p>+Topic Outlines and Discussion</p>		<p>Assignment A:</p> <p>Instructions – Presentation and discussion of essay outline</p>
6	<p>TUTORIAL</p> <p>+Debating and Discussion “Africa’s Position in the World”</p> <p>+STUDENTS’ PRESENTATIONS (Group I)</p> <p>+Topic Outlines and Discussion</p>		<p>Assignment A:</p> <p>Instructions – Presentation and discussion of essay outline</p>

7	<p>THE NEGOTIATED STATE, POWER AND AUTHORITY IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA</p> <p>+How is state power and authority experienced on an everyday basis?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard - Negotiating Statehood, Dynamics of Power, and Domination in Africa ("Negotiating Statehood, Dynamics of Power and Domination in Africa": p.1 – 23) 2) Daniel E. Agbiboa - They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria ("Introduction: Rethinking Corruption": p.1-46) <p>Additional (Optional) Readings</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan - States at Work, Dynamics of African Bureaucracies ("Introduction: Studying the Dynamics of African Bureaucracies": p.3 – 33).</i> 	Participation
8	<p>EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS WITH THE STATE AND POLITICS</p> <p>+ How is political power encountered and negotiated?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2005. Urban Circulation and the Everyday Politics of African Urban Youth: The Case of Douala, Cameroon. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 29, pp. 516-532. ISSN 03091317 2) Wale Adebawo – Everyday State and Democracy in Africa, Ethnographic Encounters ("Introduction", p.1-46) <p>Additional (Optional) readings,</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Cohen, David William and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo - Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa ("Introduction": p.1 – 10 and "One Body, two Funerals": p.11-20 	Participation
9	<p>ETHNOGRAPHIES OF EXTRACTION AND POLITICS IN AFRICA</p> <p>+ What does a prevalent and important economic activity such as mining (or other forms of natural resource extraction) mean for everyday African political experiences?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) James H. Smith - The Eyes of the World: Mining The Digital Age In The Eastern DR Congo ("The Eyes of the World: Themes of Movement, Visualization, and (Dis)embodiment in Congolese Digital": p.32 – 68). 2) Melusi Nkomo & Lotti Nkomo – "Politics from the Pits: Artisanal Gold Mining, Politics and the Limits of Hegemonic State Domination in Zimbabwe", Journal of Southern African Studies, 49:1, 137-153, DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2023.2182982 <p>Additional (Optional) Readings</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Pierre-Philippe Fraiture – "Digging holes, excavating the present, mining the future: extractivism, time, and memory in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's and Sammy Balaji's works", Modern & Contemporary France, DOI: 10.1080/09639489.2023.2244906</i> 	Participation

10	POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA +How is Development Political? Why do development plans often fail, or achieve inadvertent results?	1) James Ferguson. 1990. "Anti-Politics Machine" (selected pages) 2) Arturo Escobar. 1995. "Encountering Development" (selected pages) Additional (Optional) Readings 1) <i>Charles Piot. Doing Development in West Africa (selected pages)</i>	Participation
11	FILM SCREENING AND DISCUSSION	The Battle for Laikipia	Participation
12	FINAL TUTORIAL + how to think, read and write "African Politics" Ethnographically? Conclusion		Participation

Additional Online Resources

Africaisacountry

Africanarguments

Africa Confidential

Africa Direct (Al-Jazeera)

Africa Today

Pambazuka.org

AllAfrica.com

Africa news online

BBC news

BBC Focus on Africa

News.Africa.Com

African political resources

Africa guide from Stanford

Various other online resources (e.g., Youtube)