**Hist 315: Environmental History of Africa**

**Fall 2021**

Tuesdays, 5-7:30

WAL 496

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# *I. DESCRIPTION & COURSE GOALS*

This class explores aspects of Africa’s history that might be covered in any other African history class—trade, labor, politics, colonialism, decolonization, development—but it does so while placing the non-human world at the center of our analysis. We will explore how what we commonly call the “environment” can enhance our understanding of Africa’s past.

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 epistemology: How did the natural world come to be regarded as something separate from the human world? And what are the problems with applying a framework grounded in western knowledge systems to societies that have not historically shared that framework? Can we incorporate African ecological frameworks, such as ideas about rainmaking, into environmental histories? This is not about “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: jungle or barren desert; uniquely filled with nasty diseases or uniquely suited to hosting megafauna; populated by people who are at the whim of their environment or populated by people who destroy their environment; a place of vast spaces with no people or 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 often must be located in historical processes that have made them so, not in immutable qualities of the “natural” world.

In order locate those historical processes, we are going to have to pay attention to 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 – or the unique event of a global pandemic! This class may prompt you to expand your sense of how we remain linked to the nonhuman world in many other ways.

So here, in a nutshell, are the course goals. By the end of this class, you will be able to:

* Consider the relationship between human and non-human factors in shaping the course of the past.
* Understand how historical events and ideas shape the present.
* Consider multiple perspectives on a past event and understand why they might be different from each other.
* Read secondary sources critically and understand how historians engage in conversation with one another.
* Find primary sources and use them to frame and answer a historical research question.
* Find and use secondary literature to contextualize your own research project.
* Make and support your own arguments both verbally and in writing and cite your sources properly.

This class meets once a week. The majority of class time will be devoted to discussion, so please come prepared and ready to talk. For policies and assignment descriptions, please see the end of this syllabus.

# *II. READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS*

*The required books for this class are:*

* Jonathan Adams, Myth of Wild Africa (California 1997)
* Jacob Dlamini, Safari Nation (Ohio 2020)
* Kevin Dawson, Undercurrents of Power (Pennsylvania 2021)
* Alexandra Kelly, Consuming Ivory (Washington 2021)
* Greg Mitman, Empire of Rubber (New Press 2021)
* Abena Osseo-Asare, Bitter Roots (Chicago 2014)

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).

*Requirements and assignments for this class:*

Seminar participation 15 points  
Reflection papers (2) 5 points

Primary source assignment 1 5 points

“Decoding the book” papers (3) 15 points

Final paper (60 points, divided)

3 potential topics + sources 5 points

One-paragraph topic description completion only

Primary material assignment 2 5 points

Prospectus, bibliography,

Timeline 10 points

Rough draft/peer review 15 points

Final paper 25 points

## *Details:*

### *Participation in discussion*

Classroom conversation is where a lot of learning occurs. If all you are here for is to hear the professor, I could record some lectures, upload them to YouTube, and skip the class altogether. If you and your classmates don't offer ideas, ask questions, and challenge the texts, not much is going to happen in this class. So everyone has to do their part. Your professor will come to class on time and prepared, having read carefully, thought about the readings, and made some notes on the issues they raise and questions I'd like to ask about them. I expect you to do the same.  These small-group classes should be dominated by conversations among students, not a dialogue between one student and an instructor who has called on that student.

Some people may feel uncomfortable speaking before groups or may find the dynamics of a particular group problematic.  I invite any of you to discuss this with me privately and I will do what I can to establish a collegial atmosphere for conversation. But it might not always be comfortable. Sometimes investigating troubling histories or debating controversial topics is not comfortable. But I will do my best to be sure everyone feels heard and respected.

### *Reflection papers*

For **weeks 2 and 4**, you should submit a brief (2 to 3 double-spaced pages) reflection on the week's readings and the issues they raise. This should not summarize the readings but should instead grapple with an issue or argument you found particularly interesting, difficult, or controversial. Please use appropriate grammar and source citations.

### *Primary source assignment 1*

For **week 3**, you should use the resources provided in the Week 3 folder "Finding primary sources." Browse and find a single image or a short text that will serve as the focus of your document-based paper. It should have something to do with human-environmental relations in colonial Africa.

* Ask yourself, what can I learn from this artifact? When is it from? Who generated it? Who preserved it for you to be able to find it online? If it is an image, describe what you see in it, avoiding language of judgement; instead, be precise, specific, and detailed. Describe clothing, landscape, architectural details, body positioning, lighting, etc. If it is a piece of text, summarize its content: be precise, specific, and detailed.
* Identify the author; try to figure out the intended audience. What is the purpose/function/goal of this item -- and what clues did you use to help you figure this out?  How did the material covered in the first class session help you to place this artifact in time and space? What is a historical question that this item can help you answer? What is a historical question that it cannot help you answer?
* Whether it is an image or a document, ask yourself: what is not included here?
* How is this image or this textual message curated both to inform and to conceal?
* If it is an image, be sure to review the insights on interpreting an image from colonial Africa that are offered in this video:
* [https://crcc.usc.edu/reading-an-image-in-the-other-context-a-visual-essay/?fbclid=IwAR1ONthP9NCohCsTEkVjufeKX\_Ha0j-rkUD8MqSV17i0XqtoKFfkTJH4-Qs (Links to an external site.)](https://crcc.usc.edu/reading-an-image-in-the-other-context-a-visual-essay/?fbclid=IwAR1ONthP9NCohCsTEkVjufeKX_Ha0j-rkUD8MqSV17i0XqtoKFfkTJH4-Qs (Links%20to%20an%20external%20site.))
* What questions could you ask about this that would require additional knowledge, other documents, other studies? What would those other inputs be?
* Your paper should include:
  + A complete citation of the source, including any meta-data about the document provided by the website, as well the link itself.
  + 1500 words (about 3 pages) of writing that addresses the questions listed above. Addressing every question thoroughly could result in a ten- or fifteen-page paper. Do not do that! Decide how you will address a selection of the questions, as they become most useful for your reading of the artifact. Make a measured, if detailed and specific, response.
  + A list of two sources from among the course readings that would allow you to research this artifact more fully.
* The paper should be double-spaced in 12-pt. font. It should conform to academic editing and formatting conventions, and it should be proofread for typographical errors.

### *“Decode the book" papers*

For **week 5, 6, and 10**, you should use the resources in the Week 5 module to assess the monograph for that week. These papers should summarize the author's key argument in about one paragraph, and then answer the questions posed in the "Decoding scholarly work" graphic and/or document. These should be between two and four pages, 12-point font, double-spaced, using appropriate grammar and edited for typos.

### *Final paper*

This will be a 20- to 25-page original research paper on some topic related to environmental history in Africa. The paper may address the post-independence period if you can find appropriate sources, but it *must* be historical in nature, i.e. asking questions about and analyzing past events. If you choose a topic or event that is too recent, you will have a difficult time finding appropriate historical secondary literature and historical sources, so I recommend you confine yourself to the period between about 1850 and the 1980s. Even topics that deal with the post-independence period should consider the impact of colonialism on events.

There are several smaller assignments for this final paper, most of them graded. They are designed to help you select a topic, practice research skills, test ideas, and do pre-writing with peer and professor feedback, culminating in a completed final draft.

* For **week 5**, you should submit three possible topics for a final paper. Each must include two secondary sources found in Historical Abstracts, JStor, or the library search engine, which could support your research. Each must also include two primary sources that could support your topic. These can be textual or visual. Bring a hard copy to class; use proper citations for the secondary sources and provide full bibliographic information for the primary sources (we'll discuss how to cite those later).
* For **week 8**, you should provide a one-paragraph description of your preliminary topic. Why is it interesting and important? What makes you think you have enough material available to you to write about this topic? Find a book or article that includes a section assessing the literature around your topic. You should turn in a hard copy of the paragraph and title of the book or article at the start of class.
* For **week 9**, you should choose a primary material artifact (text or image) that supports your paper topic. Bring a 1000-word (1500 words max) analysis of the item, using the same guiding questions you were given for the first primary source assignment, and include an explanation of why it is useful for your paper topic. Include a complete citation of the source. Bring a hard copy to class and be prepared to present in class.
* For **week 11**, you should provide a prospectus (description and rationale), bibliography, and timeline of your project.
  + The timeline should be a one-page chronology of events relevant to your topic.
  + You should select three primary source items for use in your paper. Choose one to present in class and bring that one in hard copy (if it is long, choose a selection).
  + Provide a one- to two-page description of your driving questions and discuss how the sources you have found so far will support your ability to pursue it.
  + Articulate what you foresee will be challenges as you complete a first full draft.
  + Provide a bibliography of primary and secondary materials, paper and digital, as it stands so far.
  + During class, you will present your chosen document in a small group.
* For **week 12**, you'll bring a detailed outline of the whole paper plus three pages from any one section, complete with footnotes. We'll workshop these in small groups, so bring copies for everyone in your group.
* For **week 14**, we will have peer review workshops of entire paper drafts. You will need to submit these drafts to your classmates by the morning of Monday, November 29. (This is right after the Thanksgiving holiday; I have no class scheduled the Tuesday before Thanksgiving to give you more time to get these done before the holiday if you wish.)
* Your final paper will be due on December 9.

# *III. COURSE SCHEDULE*

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| **Part 1: Foundations** |
| *Week 1: What is environmental history? How do we study it?*  Tues. Aug. 31   * In-class readings and activities   + <https://aeon.co/essays/if-we-talk-about-hurting-our-planet-who-exactly-is-the-we>   + https://www.africa.com/calls-to-halt-construction-of-massive-oilfield-in-one-of-africas-last-wildernesses/   + Getting a handle on African environments and environmental perceptions: assign puzzlers   + How to read an academic book or article * Lecture on Africa’s colonial history |
| *Week 2: Contradictions: Desert or jungle? Overpopulated or empty? Last Eden or expanding desert?*  Tues. Sept. 7  Reading:   * Binyavanga Wainaina, “How to write about Africa,” *Granta,* 2005: <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/> * Robert Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *Atlantic,* Feb. 1994: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>   Read this article for its environmental imagery. If you are not sure, assume that it is racist and inaccurate. And if you find the writing and argument seductive, don’t feel bad– this article influenced Africa policy-makers who should have known better. But draw some conclusions about why this piece was so influential.   * Betsy Hartmann, “Population, Environment, and Security: A New Trinity,” *Environment and Urbanization* 10:2 (October 1998), 113-128.(Canvas)   ***Due by noon on Tuesday:*** 2- to 3-page (double spaced) reflection paper.  *Either* address any aspect of these readings that caught your interest and that you want to work through;  *Or* find an article on Africa’s environment or ecology from the last two years, taken from the mainstream media (not a scientific journal). Does your article follow the to do list offered by Binyavanga Wainaina? Does it invoke any Kaplanesque imagery? (Upload the article with your paper and be prepared to share it with the class.)    *In class:*   * Share what you learned about your particular environmental context. * Discuss how to find primary sources related to environmental history. |
| *Week 3: (Hi)stories of the African environment and the politics of knowledge*  Tues. Sept. 14  Reading:   * 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)), Chapter 3. * Michele Wagner, “Environment, Community and History: ‘Nature in the Mind’ in 19th- and 20th-century Buha, Western Tanzania,” in Gregory Maddox, James Giblin, and Isaria N. Kimambo, eds., *Custodians of the Land* (Boydell and Brewer 1996), 175-99. * Clapperton Chakanetsa Mahvunga, “Seeing the National Park from Outside of It:” On an African Epistemology of Nature,” in *RCC Perspectives* (2014), 53-60. * Paul Guthiga and Andrew Newsham, “Meteorologists Meeting Rainmakers,” *IDS Bulletin* 42:3 (2011), 104-109.   ***Due at the beginning of class:*** Primary source assignment #1. Bring a hard copy to class. |
| *Week 4: Colonialism and the environment*  Tues. Sept. 21   * James McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land,* Ch. 6. * Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History* (Ohio University Press 1996; orig. 1977), Chs. 7 and 8. * Jeremy Swift, “Desertification: Winners and Losers,” in Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey 1996), 73-90. * Spend 30 minutes or so either researching #TeamTree and critiques of it or the history, successes, failures and future of Africa’s Great Green Wall initiative (use Google, JStor, Proquest, and any other databases you know). What can we learn about the politics of knowledge and the role of science today? About narratives of environmental change and restoration?   *In class:* Workshop on how to find and read monographic scholarly materials.  ***Due by noon on Tuesday:*** 2- to 3-page reflection paper on this week’s readings. If you like, you may consider how the colonial modes of environmental knowledge explored this week differed from some of those we read about last week. |
| **Part 2: Charismatic megafauna and the people who shoot them** |
| *Week 5: Conservation and game parks*  Tues. Sept. 28  Reading: Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa* (W.W. Norton 1992).  ***Due at the start of class:*** Three possible topics for a final paper (5 points).  For each possible topic, include:  2 secondary sources found in Historical Abstracts, JStor, or the library search engine that could support your research.  2 primary sources that could support your topic.  Bring a hard copy to class. Use Chicago Manual of Style bibliographic citations for the secondary sources. |
| *Week 6: Social histories of game parks*  Tues. Oct. 5  Reading: Jacob Dlamini, *Safari Nation* (Ohio 2020).  ***Due by noon on Tuesday: Decode the book.*** (5 points)  In two to three pages: Summarize what you think is the author’s key argument, in one paragraph. Then answer the questions posed in the visual or text version of the resources on how to read scholarly work (posted in Canvas under Week 1). You may do this as text, or in bullet point form. |
| *Week 7: Elephants in the world*  Tues. Oct. 12  Reading: Alexandra Celia Kelly, *Consuming Ivory* (University of Washington 2021).  ***Due by noon on Tuesday: Decode the book.*** (5 points)  In two to three pages: Summarize what you think is the author’s key argument, in one paragraph. Then answer the questions posed in the visual or text version documents on decoding scholarly work. Please do this in the form of a paper, not bullet points. |
| **Part 3: Global Connections** |
| *Week 8: Atlantic slavery and environmental knowledge*  Tues. Oct. 19  Reading: Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power* (University of Pennsylvania 2021).  ***Due at the start of class:*** Write a one-paragraph description of your preliminary topic. Why is it interesting and important? Find a book or article that has a section assessing the literature around your topic.  To turn in: paragraph, plus title of book or article, in hard copy, at beginning of class.  Individual meetings with me this week are strongly encouraged and are available during posted office hours or by appointment. |
| *Week 9*: *American Capitalism and African Environments*  Tues. Oct. 26  Reading: Gregg Mitman, *Empire of Rubber* (New Press 2021).  ***Due at the start of class: Research Projects: Primary source assignment #2*** (5 pts)  Choose a primary material artifact (text or image) that supports your paper topic.  Bring in a 1000-word (1500 max) analysis of the item, using the same guiding questions as you were given for primary material assignment 1, and include explanation of why it is useful for your paper topic. Include complete citation of source.  Bring a hard copy to class; be prepared to present in class. |
| *Week 10*: *Extraction and the ownership of knowledge*  Tues. Nov. 2  Reading: Abena Osseo-Asare, *Bitter Roots* (Chicago 2014).  ***Due by noon on Tuesday: Decode the book.*** (5 points)  In two to three pages: Summarize what you think is the author’s key argument, in one paragraph. Then answer the questions posed in the text version of “decoding scholarly work.” Please do this in the form of a paper, with proper grammar and good organization.  **Research projects**: Bring in your questions about citations, such as bibliographic formatting and the correct format of footnotes. |
| *Week 11*  Tues. Nov. 9: *Research Projects*  ***Due:*** Timeline, Prospectus, Bibliography (15 pts)   * + Provide a one-page chronology of events relevant to your topic.   + Select 3 primary source items for use in your paper.   + Of the three, choose one to present in class. Bring that one in hard copy.   + Provide a one-to-two-page description of your driving question and a discussion of how the sources you have found so far will support your ability to pursue it.   + Articulate what you foresee will be challenges as you complete your first full draft.   + Provide a bibliography -- primary and secondary materials, paper & digital -- as it stands so far.     During class, you will present your chosen document in a small group.  Be prepared to listen closely and comment on other presentations. |
| *Week 12*  Tues. Nov. 16: *Research Projects*  ***Due:*** Bring to class a detailed outline of the whole paper plus three pages from any one section, complete with footnotes. Bring copies for your small group. |
| *Week 13*  Tues. Nov. 23: No class  Office hours during class time, by appointment |
| *Week 14:*  Tues. Nov. 30: *Research projects*  Peer review workshop of paper drafts (15 points)  ***Due:*** Complete rough draft of paper due, footnotes included. Bring a hard copy to class. |
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| Dec. 9: Final papers due (25 points) |

# *IV. The very important fine print*

## *COVID-SPECIFIC POLICIES:*

We do not know what the fall brings, and things could change radically before semester’s end. We’re just going to roll with it and take it as it comes. In the meantime, breakthrough cases are already a problem and it’s likely to get worse. We are all glad to be back together, so let’s do everything we can to sustain an in-person semester.

If you are sick, even a little bit, or have been exposed to someone with COVID please do NOT come to class. Normally we all power through when we have a cold. This semester, please don’t. Stay home until you feel better or get a negative COVID test. Normally, I have an attendance policy on the theory that you and your classmates' learning depends on your presence in class. This year, I will not penalize anyone for absences and I will be as flexible as possible on late assignments. In return, I ask that you please do not abuse this policy - come to class and get your work done if you are able to do so.

## *COMMUNICATIONS POLICY*

Like others, I struggle to keep email from occupying every minute of my day and cannibalizing the time I should be spending on other parts of my job. I manage this by designating specific times each day that I check email.

Except on unusually busy days, I will respond to your time-sensitive emails within 24 hours during the work week. I do not respond to email in the mornings before class and on weekends, and I rarely check email after 5 pm on weekdays. If you have a true emergency, you can text me at 301-785-0691.

Before emailing me with a time-sensitive question, be sure of the following:

1. That it is not answered in the policies or other section of the Canvas site.
2. That it was not addressed in a class session you did not attend.
3. That you have first posed your question to at least one fellow student or library staff, as appropriate.

I will not respond to emails that ask questions clearly covered in the Canvas course site or in a class you did not attend. All that said, I welcome your forwards of interesting news stories, music links, local events, and other Africa-related material— but I might not respond to these within 24 hours.

## *CLASSROOM CONDUCT: GROUND RULES*

Many of these are from https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/inclusive-teaching-learning/establishing-ground-rules/

* Do not be late to class. Turn off or silence cell phones. Laptops are welcome but please stay on the relevant course sites. Block tempting sites during our course period if you need to (I like Leechblock but there are many options).
* Please learn each other's names.
* Respect the speaker, even when you do not agree with or respect the point the speaker is making.
* Listen carefully; do not interrupt—even when you are excited to respond.
* Try not to generalize about groups (even groups with which you identify) and do not ask another person to speak as a representative of a group.
* Keep an open mind—enter the classroom dialogue with the expectation of learning something new. Look forward to learning about–and being challenged by–ideas, questions, and points of view that are different than your own.
* Do not “monopolize” the conversation; give others a chance to contribute to the discussion.
* Support an atmosphere of learning and growth. Approach discussion as a means to “think out loud.” Allow others (as well as yourself) to revise and clarify ideas and positions in response to new information and insights.
* Bring out ideas, perspectives, or solutions that you think are not yet represented or haven’t yet been adequately discussed.
* Support your arguments with evidence. Be honest when you are not sure if you have enough evidence to make a strong argument or when your thoughts about a topic are still speculative or exploratory.
* Try not to make assumptions; ask questions to learn more about other perspectives, especially those that are different from your own.
* Talk with the instructor about patterns in the discussion that are troubling or that may be impeding full engagement by you or others. If it is not possible to talk with the course instructor, talk with the department chair, an academic advisor, or a trusted mentor.
* 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.

## *ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS AND RESOURCES*

* Citations for all written work should be in footnotes or endnotes and should follow the guide here: <https://www.library.georgetown.edu/tutorials/research-guides/turabian-footnote-guide> Lectures should be cited as “McKittrick, lecture, date.” If your major uses another citation form that you are very comfortable with, please speak with me.
* If I suspect plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty, I reserve the right to ask any student to come to my office to discuss their written work with me.
* 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, preparing for discussion, and working on written assignments. Some weeks will be busier than others, however—look at the course schedule below and plan ahead.
* Instructional continuity: In the event that university classes are canceled, students should check their email and Canvas for instructions.
* One of the most important skills to have for life success, including success in this class, is time management. Some people are naturally good at it; some come from families where it was modeled and taught. Others do not have these advantages. If you struggle with managing your time, I encourage you to consult the web’s boundless resources – different techniques work for different people – or to visit the Academic Resource Center’s web page: https://academicsupport.georgetown.edu/acad%20resources# This offers a variety of resources for improving time management and study skills.
* 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.