

AFRI 5050/4050A: Selected Topics in African Studies -- Oral Literature and History in Africa

**Crosslisted: HIST 4915H: Topics in History:
Winter 2016**

Instructor: Nduka Otiono

Introduction: Since 1970 when Ruth Finnegan's seminal work *Oral Literature in Africa* was published, fieldwork and scholarly inquiry into Oral Literature and History in Africa have undergone significant transformation. This course explores the transformation from the anthropological bias of Finnegan, through the literary bent of Isidore Okpewho, to the more interdisciplinary orientation of contemporary studies of oral literature and history in Africa. Central to the topics to be covered in the course is the significance of *storytelling* to Africa's intangible cultural heritage and the idea that "In Africa, when an old [person] dies, it's a library burning" (Amadou Hampâté Bâ). Associated with this idea is the fact that the oral artist in Africa is more than an "artist"; s/he is a repository of knowledge and the historical memory of the society. The course samples the oral tradition and oral arts of Africa not just as forms of indigenous knowledge production but also as forms of artistic/cultural expression. The course examines the content and form of selected representative texts that include epics (e.g. *The Epic of Sundiata* and *The Ozidi Saga*), myths, songs, non-fiction, historical texts, and popular cultural texts (e.g. films), while highlighting the work of leading scholars in the field. The course is, therefore, interdisciplinary in nature—drawing from the literary arts, performance studies, cultural studies, history/ historiography, anthropology, and philosophy.

Class Format: This course is designed as a once a week, three-hour seminar.

As this is an honours/graduate seminar, the professor will not be lecturing for the most part. During the seminars, students are required to engage in deeper critical conversations with the texts and the main themes of the course. To do so, students must be prepared to participate fully in an informed way. The assigned readings for the week will be critically discussed in order to deepen students' understanding of the subject or theme of the week.

Aims and Goals:

This course emphasizes students' professionalization through excellent writing skills and independent critical reasoning. Students are therefore strongly encouraged to make presentations and produce essays that demonstrate analytical reasoning and sustained critical engagement with the texts, themes, cultural producers, and scholars.

At the end of the course, students are expected to have considerably broadened and deepened their appreciation of the complex nature of the production of "indigenous" knowledge in Africa. The course also aims to enable students to better understand the evolution of the study of Oral Literature and History in Africa, and the significant ways that it has shaped the understanding of the continent. It is hoped that at the end of the course, students will produce a standard essay that can be reworked and submitted for consideration in a peer-reviewed journal.

Assessment: **1.** Class attendance and participation; **2.** Seminar presentation; **3.** mid-term essay developed from your seminar presentation; **4.** Final paper, subdivided into:

- a) essay Proposal or Short abstract presentation
- b) final class presentation consisting of a 10-15 minute presentation of your draft Term Paper -- half of the evaluation for this presentation will come from your peers in the class at the end of your presentation
- c) completed final (term) paper

Text: To be announced

Questions? Please email me at: Nduka_Otiono@carleton.ca