History 317

Seminar on Ethnicity in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa

Strathmore University

Instructor: Dr. Alphonse Otieno

Spring Semester

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Course Description:

Ethnicity has significantly shaped politics, economies, cultures, and societies in contemporary Africa. Civil wars, corruption, unemployment, poverty, and failed state phenomenon, major problems that have occurred in most parts of the continent have been generally attributed to ethnicity or “tribalism.” Different interpretations have been offered to explain the origin and resilience of ethnicity. Early and recent interpretations have viewed ethnicity generally as primordial, racial, biological, or as a given; that Africans have through out time been naturally “tribal,” that they have been “tribal” since time immemorial. Yet in seeing ethnicity as primordial or as a given, the interpretations hardly capture the constructed nature of ethnicity and nuanced historical dynamics which have shaped it over time. This course will explore historical origins of ethnicity in different parts of Africa. It will also examine its significance for the colonial and postcolonial state and African peoples of different socioeconomic backgrounds: how they have deployed it for political, cultural, and economic ends, and how this use has impacted the politics, cultures, economies, and environments of African countries. We will focus on different regions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Required Readings:


Thiong'o, wa Ngugi, *Decolonizing the Mind* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986).


Greene, Sandra E., *Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change in the Upper Slave Coast* (Heinemann, 1996).
**Teaching format:** Discussion

**Readings:**

Five of the required readings are in the book store. These include *Citizen and Subjects; Half a Yellow Sun; Decolonizing the Mind; Making Ethnic Ways; Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change in the Upper Slave*. You can get *Saviors and Survivors* from Amazon. There are used copies in Amazon not only of the latter but of the former going at affordable prices.

**Evaluation:**

- Participation .................................................. 20%
- Book Review .................................................. 20%
- 2 short papers (3 pages each) .................................. 20%
- Final paper .................................................. 40%

**Participation:** Active intellectual engagement in discussions will earn you good participation grade. Participation here means asking questions that can stimulate intellectual discussion from the rest of the class, not waiting to be asked questions. You will also have to inject critical perspectives that question existing assumptions, as well as arguments in the reading materials. You are expected to do your readings in order to show familiarity with reading materials. In short, you must be active, creative, analytical, critical, and engaging.

You will also be expected to do a brief presentation (10 minutes maximum) on one topic of your choice. The presentation should capture clearly the arguments in the readings of that particular week, how the arguments are made and your take on them. Raise questions about the readings. The idea is to usher the class into discussion. Evaluations will be based on how well you accomplish the task.

**Book Review:** You will write a 5-7 pages review of Mahmood Mamdani’s book, *Saviors and Survivors*. In the review, you are expected to describe and analyze critically the argument the author is making. Evaluate the book by pointing out its strengths and weaknesses, as well as showing to what extent the author succeeds in making his argument. In brief, the idea is to develop your skills in critical reading and writing.

**Short papers:** You will pick 2 topics from those outlined in the weekly schedules and write brief response to each topic, length 3 pages. You are expected to show the arguments made in the reading materials for each of those weeks and provide a critical response.
Final paper: At the end of the semester you will be expected to have produced a well researched paper where you raise or answer questions which will arise from the readings and discussions—length 10-15 pages.

Submission of Assignments:

No late submission of assignments. Assignments are to be submitted on due date.

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory, except for cases with genuine excuses provable with evidence which must be provided in advance.

Phones: Cell phones must be off during class time.

Plagiarism: No plagiarism. Acknowledge or cite ideas which are not yours. Do not copy or submit papers produced elsewhere for other classes.

Weekly Schedules:

Jan 20: Introduction: What is ethnicity?

Jan 27: Is ethnicity Primordial?

- Crawford Young, “Nationalism, ethnicity, and class in Africa,” Cashiers d’ etude Africaines, 103 (19860, 421-95
- Patrick, “Exclusion, Classification, and Internal Colonialism: The emergence of Ethnicity Among the Tsonga-Speakers of South Africa,” in Leroy Vail, The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa

On reserve:


Feb 3: The making of Ethnicity in the Pre-colonial Era. Was there ethnicity in the pre-colonial period?

• Sandra Greene, Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change

Feb 10: Is Ethnicity a colonial invention?

• Patrick Harris, “The Roots of Ethnicity: Discourse and the Politics of Language Construction in South-East Africa.” (Reading in the internet)

Feb 17:


Feb 24: Ethnicity, culture, and race: Is ethnicity racial/cultural?


March 3:

Ethnicity in postcolonial conflicts: How has ethnicity been utilized in postcolonial Africa?

Civil war in post-colonial Nigeria:

• Chimamanda, Ngozi Adichie: Half a Yellow Sun, Anchor, 2007
• Chinua Achebe, Chinua Achebe on Biafra: Talking to Transition, Transition, no. 36, 1968
March 10: Documentary on Rwanda: *Ghosts of Rwanda* by Greg Barker.

March 17: Ethnicity and Genocide


March 24: Documentary: *All about Darfur* by Taghreed Elsanhouri, or the devil on the Cross by Annie Sundberg.

March 31: Darfurian conflicts, ethnicity, race, and environment:

- Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and War on Terror*, (Pantheon, 2009)

  *Book review due*

April 7: Ethnicity, nation, and democracy: How has ethnicity been disruptive and significant for democracy?


April 14: Ethnicity and language:

- Ngugi wa Thion’o: *Decolonizing the Mind*

April 21: Discussing Final papers

April 28: Wrapping up the course

*Final paper due*