Purpose: Independent Study Proposal in Work towards a Minor in African History

Course Details:
- **Designation**: HIS 299D – Independent Study
- **Term**: Fall, 2017 (10 weeks)
- **Weeks**: 9/27 – 12/6

Course Title:  
*West African Ethnographies and Histories of the Eighteenth Century*

Course Description and Rationale:

This independent study course is on ethnographies from and histories of eighteenth-century West Africa. It will focus on how writers produced knowledge about African peoples, cultures, societies, geographies, and histories from roughly 1700 to 1800. Additionally, it will focus on how historians produce knowledge about eighteenth-century West Africa today, with a special emphasis on how they engage with and supplement the ethnographic source material from the eighteenth century. My dissertation research focuses on how proslavery writers produced, consumed, and deployed knowledge about African peoples, societies, and histories in the era of British slave trade and slavery abolition (approximately 1780s to 1834). For this reason, with the exception of the final week’s readings on comparative material, I have chosen to build this syllabus around British source material and regions of West Africa where the British had a significant involvement. I have chosen to omit discussions of North Africa, Gabon, and West-Central Africa (Kongo-Angola) because the British had minimal involvement in those regions during the eighteenth century. Additionally, my choice to focus upon the eighteenth century reflects the fact that this period saw the rise, height, and demise of the British transatlantic slave trade from Western Africa to the European colonies of the Americas.

Course Structure:

This course consists of ten meetings over eleven weeks. Generally, the readings for each week are designed to balance broad surveys with detailed histories, methodological and theoretical works with specific case studies, and articles with monographs. Selections from *Sources and Methods in African History*, edited by Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings, have been scattered throughout the syllabus in an effort to ground the course in an ongoing awareness and discussion of sources, methods, and approach. The course syllabus is organized in five sections:

1. **The first section is called “Approaches to West African Ethnography & History,”** and it is one week long. This introductory section features a selection of readings that provide a theoretical and methodological context for studying sources on the West African past. The methodological component of this week focuses on oral tradition as a form of historical knowledge.

2. **The second section is called “Primary Sources for West African Ethnography & History.”** This section consists of two weeks on primary-source material in various formats, including one week on textual or documentary sources and another week on non-textual sources. The non-textual sources highlighted in the second part of this section include archaeological sources, sources on material culture, and oral sources.

3. **The third section is called “Surveys of West African Ethnography & History.”** This section consists of two weeks, where the goal is to outline British knowledge of West Africa in the
eighteenth century. The first week focuses on classic works and the second week focuses on recent works. Overall, this section is designed as a way to ground the course in surveys on British knowledge about West Africa in preparation for a few case studies. I have supplemented each of the two main texts for these weeks with some articles that discuss a specific historical actor who contributed to British knowledge of West Africa in these years.

The fourth section of the syllabus is called “Case Studies in African Ethnography and History,” and it consists of four weeks. Each week features three sources that explore a particular region of West Africa with which the British had a close involvement in the eighteenth century. I have included a primary source and a couple of secondary sources for each of these regions. The goal here is to juxtapose broad ethnographic portrayals of each region with modern histories of that same region. The articles are designed to offer a more-detailed analysis of a specific locality within each region.

The fifth and final section of the syllabus is called “Beyond African Ethnographies of the Eighteenth Century,” and it features only one week. The goal of this last week is to close out the course—and set a tone for my research moving forward—by taking on a larger perspective. This week is designed as a way to start thinking about how researchers like anthropologists have dealt with, and are continuing to deal with, the legacy of African ethnography in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A case study by Lyn Shumaker is supplemented by a more general discussion from Sally Falk Moore. A final selection from *Sources and Methods* emphasizes contemporary and innovative approaches to African History.

### Course Calendar:

#### Meeting One:

**Theme:** Approaches to West African Ethnography & History – Theories and Methods  


#### Meeting Two:

**Theme:** Primary Sources for West African Ethnography & History – Textual Sources  
**Reading:** Introduction and first 8 Chapters of *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. by Philip D. Curtin et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967). Pp. 3-216. Also skip the section on Olaudah Equiano, 60-98, because his narrative is featured elsewhere on this syllabus.


**Meeting Three:**

**Theme:** Primary Sources for West African Ethnography & History – Non-Text Sources


**Meeting Four:**

**Theme:** Surveys of West African Ethnography & History – Part 1, A Classic Works


**Meeting Five:**

**Theme:** Surveys on West African Ethnography & History – Part 2, A Recent Work


**Meeting Six:**

**Theme:** Case Studies in African Ethnography and History – Part 1, “Senegambia”

**Reading:** All of Mungo Park’s *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed Under the Direction of Patronage of the African Association in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London: W. Bulmer and Company, 1799). Pp. 1-484


**Meeting Seven:**

**Theme:** Case Studies in African Ethnography and History – Part 2, “Gold Coast”

**Reading:** First 17 letters from Willem Bosman’s *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts* (London: J. Knapton, 1705). First published in Dutch in 1703 as *Nauwkeurige beschrijving van de Guinese Goud- Tand- en Slavekust*. These letters cover the Gold Coast. Pp. 1-322.


**Meeting Eight:**

**Theme:** Case Studies in African Ethnography and History – Part 3, “Slave Coast”

**Reading:** Books I & II from William Snelgrave’s *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea, and the Slave Trade* (London: James, John, & Paul Knapton, 1734). These books cover his experiences in Dahomey, Whidah, and Jakin. Pp. 1-191.


**Meeting Nine**:

**Theme**: Case Studies in African Ethnography and History – Part 4, “Biafra”


**Meeting Ten**:

**Theme**: Beyond African Ethnographies of the Eighteenth Century – Comparative Models

