

Print Cultures in African History: Publics, Politics and Identities

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Contact Hours: 10 x two-hour seminars (7 classes in Michaelmas; 3 classes in Lent)

From the late nineteenth century onwards, Africa was witness to a proliferation of various forms of print and writing, produced for eager, locally grown audiences. All sorts of texts, including serialised novels, newspapers, pamphlets, tracts, local histories, self-help booklets and vernacular literature became available for public consumption. While many of the men and women producing and engaging with this material were well educated and high-status, others were non-elites such as wage labourers, clerks, traders and artisans. In varied and usually contested ways, these people generated active public and social spheres of political and cultural debate that were defined and framed by their lively print cultures. Some participants experimented with literary genres and developed new forms of writing, others assumed roles of defining and claiming power and citizenship, while a few simply sought access to a social world defined by literacy, without ever feeling fully entitled to its status. Apart from publishing and printing material, Africans also penned a prolific amount of handwritten documents, especially diaries and letters. Across the colonial/postcolonial divide, the capacity of print and writing to enhance personal and social existence was revered. Many people genuinely believed that through print, one could create a particular kind of civilised and civic community.

Taking these printed and written sources as its starting point, this MPhil option course reclaims African print cultures as a domain of historical study. It uses print culture as an entry point through which to explore the dynamic worlds of intellectual and cultural production in sub-Saharan Africa. Offering a window into processes of rapid social and political change during the colonial and postcolonial eras, African print cultures can also reveal historical continuities often overlooked in academic literature, which tends to emphasise the more radical transformations unleashed by colonialism. We will interrogate the commonly assumed distinction between oral and written forms of cultural production by exploring the textual forms, new vocabularies, and political narratives that people in Africa constructed through their engagement with literacy and print. Significantly, this engagement was not only focused within and across local communities, it also occasionally reached out to transnational and global networks. To this end, we consider African print cultures in a comparative global framework and critically analyse the usefulness of theoretical tools developed with reference to historical contexts outside of Africa.

Following an introductory session, the course begins by exploring how new forms of textual production - such as the serialised novel - provided a space for innovation and creativity in colonial Africa. For example, possibly the first West African novel written in English, *Marita: or the Folly of Love*, was published in instalments by a local Gold Coast newspaper from 1886 to 1888. We situate this text in its political and social context, considering issues such as the colonial marriage legislation it sought to critique, as well as questions of anonymity and the material constraints that shaped the development of Ghanaian print culture. A few decades on in the late 1920s, a Nigerian newspaper published a series of letters titled *The Life Story of Me, Segilola*. Now recognised as the first Yoruba language novel, the narrative presents the autobiography of a repentant courtesan, regaling the reader with risqué

escapades, pious moralising and vivid evocations of urban popular culture in interwar Lagos. Elsewhere, in more personal colonial settings, people like the Yoruba gentleman Akinpelu Obisesan, and so-called 'unschooled' migrant workers in South Africa, appropriated handwritten textual forms such as diaries and letter-writing. Articulating new forms of self-expression and identity, they negotiated the boundaries between their private and public worlds, and often generated complex social networks in the process.

Early twentieth-century South Africa presents another, more cosmopolitan type of printing experiment – a multilingual and transnational newspaper called *Indian Opinion*. Produced by the 'International Printing Press' (of which Gandhi was a sometime proprietor) the publication came into circulation in 1903, followed by numerous pamphlets, including most famously, Gandhi's nationalist text *Hind Swaraj*. In Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta founded his Kikuyu newspaper *Muigwithania* in 1928, and experimented with yet another model of print culture – a vernacular language publication that strived to reconcile moral ethnicity with nationalist thought. Two decades later in the late 1940s, the journalist Henry Muoria began producing another paper, *Mumenyereri*, which offers important insights into the gendered dimensions of nationalist politics in pre-Mau Mau Kenya. Our penultimate session moves into the post-independence era, taking as its focus a particular genre of postcolonial African print culture – the prison memoir. The last case study explores the popular fiction of postcolonial Anglophone West Africa, namely Onitsha Market Literature and Ghanaian romance novels. Published primarily in the 1960s by local presses in a lively town in southeastern Nigeria, Onitsha Market Literature consists of English-language stories, plays and self-help pamphlets couched in moral discourses, many of them offering marriage advice. Comparing this material with Ghanaian romance novels published from the 1960s onwards, we return to how African print cultures constructed ideas of conjugality, love, femininity and masculinity, themes explored in the early part of the course.

Select Bibliography

- K. Barber, 'Translation, Publics and the Vernacular Press in 1920s Lagos' in *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honor of J.D.Y. Peel* ed. T. Falola, (Durham NC, 2005)
- K. Barber, *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington IN, 2006)
- K. Barber, *Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel: I.B. Thomas's "Life Story of Me, Segilola" and Other Texts* (Leiden, 2012)
- B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, 'The Labors of *Muigwithania*: Jomo Kenyatta as Author, 1928-45' *Research in African Literatures* 29 (1998), pp. 16-42
- K. Breckenridge, 'Love Letters and Amanuenses: Beginning the Cultural History of the Working Class Private Sphere in Southern Africa, 1900-1933' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26 (2000), pp. 337-348
- I. Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge MA, 2013)
- W. Muoria-Sal, B. Folke Frederiksen, J. Lonsdale & D. Peterson (eds.), *Writing for Kenya: The Life and Works of Henry Muoria* (Leiden, 2009)
- S. Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: "How to Play the Game of Life"* (Bloomington IN, 2002)
- S. Newell, *Readings in African Popular Fiction* (Oxford, 2002)
- S. Newell (ed.), *Marita, or the Folly of Love A Novel by A Native* (Leiden, 2002)

S. Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa* (Athens OH, 2013)

R. Watson, 'Literacy as a Style of Life: Garveyism and Gentlemen in Colonial Ibadan' *African Studies* 73 (2014), pp. 1-21

Class Outline

1. Introduction: Print, Power and Publics in African History
2. The Birth of the English Novel in West Africa – *Marita: or the Folly of Love*
3. The Lagos Press and the Yoruba Novel in 1920s Nigeria: *The Life Story of Me, Segilola*
4. Private Writing, Public Personae: The Diary of Akinpelu Obisesan, a Yoruba Gentleman in Colonial Nigeria
5. Labour Migrants, Letter Writing and the Depression Years on South Africa's Mines
6. Making Transnational Publics: Gandhi's Printing Press in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa
7. Print Culture and the Remaking of Political Identities: Jomo Kenyatta and *Muigwithania*
8. Nationalism and Domestic Life: Henry Muoria and *Mumenyereri*
9. Print and Protest: Prison Memoirs in Postcolonial Africa
10. Self-Help and Romance: Popular Literature in Postcolonial Anglophone West Africa