

African Connected biographies: a methodology for historical research PHD

Wednesday, 4 March, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2
Wednesday, 11 March, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2
Wednesday, 18 March, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2
Wednesday, 1 April, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2
Wednesday, 8 April, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2
Wednesday, 15 April, 11 a.m.-1 p.m., Room 2
Wednesday, 22 April, 11 a.m.-1 p.m., Room 2
Wednesday, 29 April, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2

office hours: to be arranged with the lecturer (p.valsecchi@ssmeridionale.it)

The course will address topics and methodological issues concerning the study of historical biographies and prosopographies of primarily African individuals and groups who lived and operated in Africa, the Atlantic world, and Europe from the early modern period to the 20th century.

The acceleration of globalisation processes since the late 20th century has led to a significant resurgence of biography as a comprehensive historiographical genre in recent decades. Historiographical horizons broadened, resulting in lines of inquiry and interpretation that focus on connections and interactions on a large geographical scale. The main impetus for this revision has been – and still is – a colossal effort to comprehensively reconsider the traditional parameters for interpreting the relationship between Europe/the West and the rest of the world, especially since the early modern period. Centripetal and hierarchical views – well represented by traditional historiography of the so-called imperial systems of the modern and contemporary age – are contrasted by more fluid and articulated perspectives in terms of “networks” with variable dynamics in space and time. The investigation of these networks provides broad insights into the stories of relationships, exchanges and profound and highly significant mutual influences between those whom a clearly hierarchical and dichotomous perspective viewed simply as dominant and dominated, denying the latter decisive historical responsibility. The personal stories of those involved in this grand historical process of encounter, clash and interaction can provide fundamental insights into the dynamics that constitute modernity.

Course structure

The course consists of eight seminar sessions. Each session begins with a presentation by the lecturer, followed by a discussion in which students are required to participate actively.

Students are required to read two thematic essays indicated by the lecturer for each seminar session.

Assessment criteria

1. Regular attendance and active participation in discussions: 50%
2. A report of up to 5,000 words on a topic agreed with the lecturer by the end of the course: 50%.

The report must be sent to the lecturer by the end of August 2026.

Assessment

Two final assessment sessions, involving the presentation and discussion of reports, will be held in September 2026 on dates to be confirmed.

SESSIONS

Session 1. Connected biographies in connected worlds 1: Introductory remarks

(Wednesday, 4 March, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2)

- Robert I. Rotberg, "Biography and Historiography: Mutual Evidentiary and Interdisciplinary Considerations", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 40, No. 3, (Winter 2010), pp. 305-324 *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/364769>.

- Heather Hughes, (2018, August 28). "African Biography and Historiography", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*
<https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-229>.

Session 2. Connected biographies in connected worlds 2: The sources and their peculiarities

(Wednesday, 11 March, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2)

- Lisa A. Lindsay, "Biography in African History." *History in Africa* 44 (2017): 11–26.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26362151>.

- Mary Dillard, (2018, November 20). "Oral History and Life History as Sources", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*
<https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-219>.

Session 3. From masters to slaves and back again

(Wednesday, 18 March, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2)

- Ray A. Kea, "'When I Die, I Shall Return to My Own Land': An 'Amina' Slave Rebellion in the Danish West Indies, 1733– 1734," in L. O. Hunwick and Nancy Lawler (Eds.), *The Cloth of Many Colored Silks: Papers on History and Society Ghanaian and Islamic in Honor of Ivor Wilks*, Evanston, 1996, pp.

- Pierluigi Valsecchi, "How Kwadwo regained his freedom and put the slave traders in big trouble". In: A. Bellagamba, S. E. Greene, M. A. Klein. *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade. Volume 1: The Sources*, Cambridge Un. Press, New York 2013, pp. 267-282.

Session 4. The Prince and the Philosopher. Early 18th Century Returnees from Europe to Africa

(Wednesday, 1 April, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2)

- Pierluigi Valsecchi, "Africani ed europei nella Costa d'Oro pre-ottocentesca", in: P. Nicelli (ed.), *L'Africa, l'Oriente Mediterraneo e l'Europa*, Africana Ambrosiana, vol. 1, Bulzoni Editore srl, Roma 2015, pp.47-66, ISBN:978-88-6897-013-0.

Session 5. Lombards in Africa: Religion, Politics and Diplomacy in 17th-18th Century Congo

(Wednesday, 8 April, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2)

-Pierluigi Valsecchi, "Lombardi in Africa fra Sei e Settecento. Una nota sui cappuccini milanesi nel regno del Congo". In: Michela Catto e Gianvittorio Signorotto, *Milano, L'Ambrosiana e la conoscenza dei nuovi mondi sec. XVII-XVIII* (Studia Borromaica, vol. 28), Roma: Bulzoni Editore srl, 2015, pp. 161-175.

- Carlos Almeida, "Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonine Movement." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 2024.

Session 6. African rulers and the colonial conquest

(Wednesday, 15 April, 11 a.m.-1 p.m., Room 2)

-Emmanuel K. Akyeampong, "Christianity, Modernity, and the Weight of Tradition in the Life of Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh I, c.1888-1931." *Africa* (IAI), 69, 2, 1999, pp. 279-311.

-Chikouna Cissé, "Samory" *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 19 Feb. 2025

Session 7. Leaders and rulers before and after Independence

(Wednesday, 22 April, 11 a.m.-1 p.m., Room 2)

-Klaas van Walraven, "Barthélmy Boganda between Charisma and Cosmology: Interpretive Perspectives on Biography in Equatorial African History", in Klaas van Walraven (ed.), *The Individual in African History: The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies*, Brill 2020, pp. 246-274

-Erik Kennes, "A Road not Taken? The Biography of Laurent Kabila (1939-2001)", in ", in Klaas van Walraven (ed.), *The Individual in African History: The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies*, Brill 2020, pp. 275-297

Session 8. Historians and Politicians

(Wednesday, 29 April, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Room 2)

-Giacomo Macola, "Imagining the Nation: Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula between Politics and History", in Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa*, Ohio University Press, 2009, pp. 95-110

-Daniel Rathbone, "Law, Politics and Interference", in Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa*, Ohio University Press, 2009, pp. 113-124

-Ettore Morelli, "Seetsele Modiri Molema: Historian of the Barolong, 1891–1965", *Afriques*, 2024
<https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.4788>