

AFRO 1131: Contemporary Issues in Africa

The Environment Theme

The establishment and expansion of European empires in Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed African life irrevocably. During the relatively short period that colonial domination lasted, thriving societies were subdued and turned into mere production appendages of European commercial interests. Former relationships between peoples, cultures and religions were thrown into disarray. Literally all pre-colonial African civilizations were radically and permanently transformed by this external impact. Even though African nations managed to overcome foreign domination through nationalist struggles that ushered in Africa's independences and marked the incipient moment of decolonization during the second half of the twentieth century, the effects of colonization continue to impact African populations to this day.

This course begins on the premise that the colonial juncture played a critical role in the shaping of modern African societies. Therefore, an engagement with the philosophical basis for colonial-capitalism, including its rootedness in Enlightenment discourse serves as the initial point of entry into the course. Considering the clash between pre-colonial African occult interpretations of phenomena and Western subjective idealism of the Enlightenment discourse, the course begins with a philosophical question, namely, how the imperializing expressions of Enlightenment as a "civilizing mission" led to the associations of non-European societies with backwardness, underdevelopment, savagery and primitive religiosity. Similarly, the entanglements of the Enlightenment with predominant notions of the ego, the thinking and acting subject in control of an objective world that s/he defines and organizes, will be subjected to critical examination.

The formulation of this course presupposes a further thesis: that virtually all concerns underlying and driving scholarly endeavor in/on Africa at the dawn of this 3rd decade of the 21st Century find echo under the banner of the central, pressing, paramount and widespread issue on the continent today: the environment. Accordingly, AFRO 1131 engages in critical reflection of colonial history and its adverse effects on both environmental and human health. It further underscores the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, as well as the role of language in shaping and revealing those interactions. The first section of the course will bring African philosophical and religious systems in dialogue with Eurocentric depictions of the African environment as a jungle, a den and a horrible environment, where nature is often in conspiracy to inhibit and militate against the wellbeing of the human.

We will consider the tensions between this Eurocentric perception and assumptions driving various conservation efforts. In numerous conservation films and nature documentaries about Africa, the image of an untouched and pristine nature that is threatened by indigenous environmental practices and in need of protection by those from the West with proper environmental sensibility recurs with monotonous regularity. One of the earliest examples, 1959 German documentary *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1960. In it, the director's thinly veiled attitude of contempt toward Africans is discernible. "I would prefer a prime minister to go hungry," Bernhard Grzimek opined, "than a lion." Bemoaning the Masai pastoral practices of boring waterholes for their cattle, thus expanding their access to pasture at the expense of wild animals, Grzimek believed that East

Africa could be best developed by curbing population growth, as well as restricting the expansion of agriculture and stock-raising in favor of tourism. Grzimek reserved his admiration only for Africans who lived “in harmony with nature,” that is, by primitive techniques and in isolation from any aspects of modernity. It is perhaps an irony of no small proportions that Grzimek’s son, cinematographer Michael Grzimek, died on location during the filming of the documentary, when the plane he piloted collided with a vulture.¹

The course will pair *Serengeti shall not die* with another documentary titled *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai* (2008). Founder of the Green Belt Movement and the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Wangari Maathai literally put her life on the line, as well as endured torture and intimidation at the hands of Daniel Arap Moi’s brutal and autocratic regime, in her environmental conservation endeavors. Having understood the ways modernity in erstwhile “provincial” contexts transformed human relations with nature and, as a result, the impact of societies on natural environments, Maathai worked tirelessly with rural women to empower their voices for participation in development that impacted their own lives and communities in sustainable and life-giving ways. *Taking Root* testifies to her unremitting zeal in the pursuit of democratic accountability and the protection of rights. Using a language that is both accessible and engaging, Maathai exposes the ways the environment is under continual threat and frequent attack as the world pillaged for her resources, in an endeavor to build spectacular and globalizing economies. Drawing on her understanding of the ways change and continuity in African environments has always involved storytelling, orally-transmitted lore and song-based narratives, Maathai lays out a compelling and pointed case that sustainability and risk management simply work within established systems. Through the two documentaries, I will highlight a proposition that has become a truism in environmental studies, i.e., the fact that solutions to environmental problems will only be sustained if they are consistent with the ethics and values of society.

Continuing our focus on East Africa, we will read material that sheds light on a region that is suffering its worst locust invasion in decades, following one of the wettest seasons in 40 years; a situation scientists say is becoming the new normal. Over the last several years, frequent droughts have left millions starving, while widespread flooding has resulted in landslides that have claimed the lives of many, and displaced hundreds of thousands.

In her environment-sensitive campaigns, Wangari Maathai not only emphasized the **relationship between tree cover, crop yields and vulnerability to climate shocks**, she further underscored their potential for civil unrest and conflict over resources. In late 2007/early 2008, violent conflict engulfed Kenya, once considered a bastion of stability and economic prosperity in a region marred by civil strife and political violence. By February 2008, dire humanitarian consequences included thousands dead and many more internally displaced, while loss for the economy was estimated at Ksh.100 billion (close to \$1.5 billion). For months on end, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, South Sudan, and Eastern Congo were short of fuel and other essential commodities because their main supply route, originating in the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa, was paralyzed by the unrest.

¹ For more see Kouamé Kouassi’s “Les élucubrations de Bernhard Grzimek ou le langage zoologique appliqué à l’Africain” in : *Peuples noirs, peuples africains*

While tremors of ethnic violence and insecurity have shaken Kenya before and after every general election, the 2008 crisis was so severe that then Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Luis Moreno Ocampo indicted six Kenyan leaders – subsequently referred to as “the Ocampo Six” – for crimes against humanity. Considered masterminds of the violence, the indicted six would become even more popular with two of them forming a coalition that saw them elected president and vice-president during Kenya’s 2013 presidential elections, then re-elected in 2018.

A former settler colony slightly smaller than the state of Texas, Kenya has a population of 53 million estimated to grow to 85 million by 2050. Only 20% of Kenya’s mostly arid land is tillable, and the portion is severely overcrowded. Tourism and agriculture remain the mainstay of economy. However, human-wildlife conflict has always exacted a heavy toll on pastoral livelihoods and put a drain on community resources.

Undoubtedly, the disputed elections served as a catalyst to deep-seated economic, social and political problems that successive government have failed to address. Underlying the highly volatile national fabric in which the disparity between the rich and the poor remains one of the world's biggest problems is **acute water scarcity owing to seasonal fluctuations that have become increasingly unreliable.**

This module will focus on issues related to **resource – particularly water – scarcity owing to climate change and economic shocks**, as well as discuss potential action that will lessen the threat of ruin and begin to build a more peaceful, sane, and secure world. **The scientific principles** pertinent to the issues discussed in this module involve the synergies between livelihoods and biodiversity conservation, including their relation to climate change and conflict-related crises.

We will conclude this section with Wanuri Kahiu 2010 short feature *Pumzi*, set in Kenya of the future, after water wars have decimated humanity. A twenty-minute futuristic and post-apocalyptic drama, *Pumzi* (“breath” in Kiswahili), features a female scientist’s efforts to tap into a life-giving source, in a bid to breathe new life and nurture growth into a destroyed and almost obliterated universe. Kahiu has credited late Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai with inspiring the film’s concern with resource depletion and environmental degradation, including their impact on planet sustainability and life itself.

In our focus on Côte d’Ivoire, the readings/viewings will spotlight a country long considered the most successful and developed member of Francophone West Africa, a symbol of political stability, ethnic peace, and an open economy in West Africa. The country was also long held as a sanctuary for war refugees from regions beyond. Côte d’Ivoire’s long history as a country of immigration made it an important destination and one of the main countries of residence for nationals of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). Since colonial times and the development of the plantation sector, the economy of the country has largely been reliant on foreign labor force. Workers from neighboring countries with limited natural resources and an overabundance of workforce, such as, primarily, Burkina Faso (previously French Upper Volta Haute-Volta), have greatly contributed to the national economic development of Côte d’Ivoire. After its independence in 1960 and up until the mid-1980s/early 1990s when the country was

struck by economic crisis, immigration was promoted by national authorities and thus continued to be high. With the end of the cocoa boom and the intense social struggle and turmoil associated with the ensuing socio-economic disintegration, a new regional shift took place. Côte d'Ivoire became progressively less attractive for West African workers. Simultaneously, increasingly restrictive policies toward foreigners were adopted. Assigned readings will illuminate how the end of the cocoa boom produced renewed political instability. Though the cocoa boom brought business and developments to the country, forest resources began to get depleted, the productivity of plantations started to decrease and the price of cacao on the international market fell, which ignited an economic crisis. We will consider potential climate-smart solutions to mitigate cocoa's environmental impact in Cote d'Ivoire. The case of Cote d'Ivoire will also be useful in understanding the class between cash crop economies in Africa and food sovereignty.

The next section will focus on clandestine migrations from the Sahel to Europe. For example, the film *Hope* showcases the plight of a young woman who quickly descends into a hallucinatory life of prostitution, drugs and alcohol abuse while en route to Spain. *Climate Refugees* (2010) explores the global human impact of climate change and its serious destabilizing effect on international politics. These readings/viewings provide the template to discuss the relationship between mass immigration and resource shortages owing to **such issues as bio-diversity loss and wealth inequality**. Specifically, **rainforest depletion and species loss** have been closely connected to questions of illegal immigration. They draw attention to the inextricably connected issues of displacement, forced migration, environmental degradation and climatic changes, and so forth. Central to this module's focus are the challenges that increased mobility in contemporary globalized world poses for environmentalism's central preoccupation with ethics of place and localized identities.

The last section of the course will focus on what has come to be referred to as "the curse of oil." African environmental activists have long linked their cause to wider concerns with the expansion of democratic spaces and civic liberties. They have also long acknowledged the interface of ecological and political reform. A case in point: the violence that has attended to the exploitation of crude oil in Nigeria seized global conscience with the murder in 1995 of nine environmentalists. Their crusade against the ecosystem degradation of the Niger Delta (with its ramifications on food safety, public health, environment preservation, and so forth), ruffled the then military junta of General Sani Abacha. Most famous of fated nine, Ken Saro Wiwa was an accomplished writer whose works continue to enjoy popularity in Africa and elsewhere.

Our last module will focus on *Lagoon*, a petro-fiction novel set in Nigeria. In his activist campaigns, the late Saro Wiwa emphatically stated that the **residues of petroleum production, left to slicken and poison the earth**, constituted a form of genocide against the masses who lived off the earth and its resources. In the decades since Saro Wiwa's murder, armed rebel groups have pursued increasingly violent forms of resistance against the petroleum industry by kidnapping oil works and sabotaging oil installations.

Ironically and tragically, despite having an Atlantic coastline of over 500 miles, Nigeria is Africa's largest importer of foreign fish. With a population of 197 million inhabitants, predicted to double by 2050, the country often teeters on the brink of famine. Previously a paradise for the traditionally fishing-based region, lagoons in the heart of the Lagos metropolis are being

depleted by various development projects, the largest of which is an oil refinery with the potential for an extensive marine and groundwater contamination.

Projected to process 650,000 barrels of oil a day when completed, for instance, the Dangote refinery on the Lekki lagoon, will reclaim over six thousand acres of swampland and most certainly turn the erstwhile fish-abundant waters into an oil slick.

Currently, most of Nigeria's oil satisfies overseas demands for fossil fuel imports, while the country imports refined petroleum products for domestic consumption. The colossal refinery would eliminate Nigeria's dependence on imported petroleum products, and in turn lower reliance on foreign exchange. Such a "positive" economic impact argument provides one of the examples on the limitations of technologies and the constraints of science on the public policy issues being considered. Indeed, how do we address the significant human and environmental risks the refinery poses to the people of Lagos while acknowledging its contribution to the country's economy? How do we promote alternative energy sources, such as wind and solar power when traditional beliefs about wind as an evil or destructive force reign, and when the sun is personified as a deity, with all the connotations that arise. While harnessing the heat and light energy released by the sun may be a matter of technology and environmental science, getting people to shed beliefs related to solar energy may be more challenging.

I will pair *Lagoon* with *Darwin's Nightmare*, a 2004 documentary about the biggest tropical lake on earth, source of the river Nile, that is, Lake Victoria in western Tanzania. Deep in the heart of Africa –said to be the birthplace of humankind – Lake Victoria is ground zero for the post-colonial exploitation of Africa by the developed world and the forces of globalization. **Westerners introduced Nile perch into the lake in the 1960s. In the years since, it ate everything in sight, decimated hundreds of separate species, destroyed thousands of years of evolution, and turned the world's largest tropical lake into a barren sinkhole.**

Here again, the export of Nile perch has provided much-needed employment in the region even as unemployment has plagued the rest of the country. However, the threat to biodiversity, and species-specific extinction through the introduction of an invasive species is now being understood by the local community.

Alongside our discussion of the underlying scientific principles behind the environmental issues being examined as highlighted above in bold, students will learn how to identify and evaluate credible information concerning the environment. *The Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018) is a film that offers a wealth of scientific evidence for dire climate change predictions. The documentary also shows how business, local governments, and citizens can take positive action to reduce future dangers. With in-depth discussions of what may lie ahead, including increases in storm surges, hurricanes, water pollution, forest fires, and epidemics, the documentary promotes the urgently needed use of alternative energy sources, such as biodiesel, clean-burning coal, and wind and solar power.