UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

SYLLABUS DEL CORSO

Culture e Società dell' Africa Subsahariana - Formazione D’Area

2627-1-F0102R009

Course title

Cultures and Societies of Sub-Saharan Africa

Topics and course structure

In dialogue with the history of the African continent, this course aims to provide an overview of the fundamental milestones of anthropology in Africa, equipping students with the tools to understand some of the major issues traversing the continent today. In contemporary Africa, inequalities have widened, political instability remains a threat, and ongoing peace processes in many areas remain partial and situated. The COVID-19 pandemic has superimposed itself onto a challenging pre-existing healthcare history (consider, for instance, the impact of AIDS in certain African countries and the resurgence of Ebola outbreaks). At the same time, the African continent is experiencing one of the fastest economic and demographic growths globally. This course aims to provide analytical frameworks to comprehend these phenomena.

The course will adopt a post-colonial perspective, putting the history of Africa into dialogue with that of Europe and other regions of the world. From a historical standpoint, it will begin with the first encounters with Europeans in the early modern period, moving toward contemporary debates on Eurafrica and new models of relationship between Europe and Africa. To outline the foundations of Africanist anthropology, the course will start with the analysis of a classic text (The Nuer by Edward E. Evans-Pritchard) to examine the key themes and concepts of area-specific anthropological studies. Thematically, the course will adopt a perspective 'from Africa' to decentre the gaze and deconstruct persistent Eurocentric narratives, supported by relevant and contemporary case studies.

Objectives

Through active participation in classes, students will learn to construct a historical and anthropological perspective on contemporary Africa; they will learn to use the African experience as a general tool for analyzing similar phenomena in other parts of the world and will enhance their ethnographic skills. Specifically, the course aims to foster the following learning outcomes:

Knowledge and understanding:
Developing knowledge of a selection of key topics and authors within the field of Africanist studies, with a particular focus on interdisciplinary dynamics.
Building a historically and anthropologically situated perspective on contemporary Africa, encouraging independent reflection.

Applying knowledge and understanding:
Acquiring a historically and anthropologically situated perspective and applying the models examined in the Sub-Saharan context to achieve a general understanding of the same phenomena in other areas of the world.
Developing and refining one's ethnographic skills.

Making judgements:
Independently formulating one's own ideas and presenting them appropriately.
Stimulating critical elaboration through the presentation and discussion of the provided materials, also in view of bibliographic research for the final dissertation.

Communication skills:
Clearly expressing ideas, knowledge, and arguments.
Drafting texts and reports, employing diverse expressive languages (audio, video, digital, artistic).
Formulating well-founded judgements free from preconceptions, integrating information from diverse and reliable sources.

Learning skills:
Developing and refining one's own learning methodologies, independently identifying and constructing objects and themes of study."

Methodologies

The course employs diversified methodologies: traditional lectures and classroom discussions based on textual materials, slides, and audiovisual documents. The course also features the participation of researchers who will present their work.

The teaching will be structured as 40% traditional lecturing (modalità erogativa) and 60% blended learning (modalità mista). Classes will be held in person, and either English or Italian will be used flexibly depending on the language skills of the class.

Online and offline teaching materials

The course develops through an active collaboration between instructors and students, both in reading the selected texts and in proposing supplementary materials. The recommended texts are available in the library or can be downloaded from the library service's digital platforms. The course's Moodle platform serves as the fundamental point of reference for both attending and non-attending students.

Programme and references

The course is structured over 10 weeks:

Week 1: Introduction to the course and historical-anthropological framework of the African continent
Week 2: Overview of decolonization processes and in-depth study of contemporary African history
Week 3: The Nuer by E.E. Evans-Pritchard: foundations of African anthropology
Week 4: Anthropology, colonialism, and coloniality in Africa
Week 5: Race in Africa: from the apartheid era to new racisms
Week 6: Kinship, age grades, and generations: key concepts of Africanist anthropology
Week 7: Economic dynamics, social inequalities, and demographic growth: new models of African development
Week 8: The role of the state in Africa: anthropological perspectives
Week 9: Gender issues
Week 10: Concluding session with guest speakers and external researchers

Core texts for the exam:

S. F. Moore, Antropologia e Africa, Raffaello Cortina Editore (2003).
E. Evans-Pritchard, I Nuer: Un'anarchia ordinata (The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People), Franco Angeli.
A. Brivio, Donne, emancipazione e marginalità. Antropologia della schiavitù e della dipendenza in Ghana (2019).
A selection of articles from those discussed in class, to be agreed upon with the instructors.

Note for non-attending students: Students who are unable to attend classes are strongly advised to replace the selection of articles (point 4) with the complete text of:
F. Cooper, Africa contemporanea. Dalla decolonizzazione a oggi, Carocci editore.

Assessment methods

An oral test on the course content is aimed at verifying knowledge acquired through the critical study of the examination programme texts and active participation in course activities (for attending students only). There are no in-itinere tests.

Choosing an oral interview as the examination method is consistent with the course's objectives, as it enables interaction with students to assess their critical understanding of course topics and ability to connect theory and practice through a communicative dialogue situation. There are no ongoing assessments.

The assessment will be based on the Dublin Descriptors: the level bands are as follows:

High Level (25-30/30): Distinguished - Excellent
Knowledge and Understanding: The student demonstrates in-depth and solid knowledge of the texts and topics covered; understands and analyses the texts presented without hesitation.
Ability to apply knowledge: is able to identify general considerations on the authors/topics examined in the texts with confidence and effective personal observations; with adequate argumentative skills, is able to analyse, summarise, interpret, contextualise and compare the texts presented, also making use of interdisciplinary links.

Autonomy of Judgement: demonstrates excellent critical skills, autonomy of judgement and originality in the analysis and interpretation of texts.

Communication Skills: expresses themselves clearly, rigorously, fluently and appropriately. Is fully aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation.

Learning skills: demonstrates excellent/very good independent learning skills, is able to effectively rework knowledge and link it to their own experience; is fully aware of the usefulness of the discipline.

Average level (18-24/30): Sufficient - Good
Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates a general understanding of the texts and topics covered. Although there are some minor inaccuracies or a few uncertainties regarding specific, non-essential details, overall the student shows sufficient comprehension and a reasonable ability to analyse the texts.
Ability to apply knowledge: The student has some difficulty connecting general points to the examples provided in the texts. The summary of the content is sometimes not very effective, and the contextualization and comparison of authors and themes could be further developed.

Autonomy of judgement: The student demonstrates a fair degree of independence in forming critical assessments, although he or she sometimes tends to rely on the opinions of others.

Communication skills: expresses themselves clearly and with sufficient precision, with a reasonable command of the specific language of the discipline. Is aware of the need to use different linguistic registers depending on the communicative situation.

Learning skills: The student demonstrates a reasonable ability to apply knowledge and relate it to personal experience. An awareness of the subject's practical value is present, though it is still developing.

Basic Level (0–17/30): Still consolidating
Knowledge and understanding: The student demonstrates only a partial understanding of the texts and topics covered. Their grasp of the content is sometimes uncertain and requires further exploration and greater precision in interpretation.

Ability to apply knowledge: The student finds it difficult to link general considerations to the examples in the texts and to summarise the content effectively. Contextualisation and comparison between authors and themes still need to be developed.

Communication skills: Oral presentation is at times lacking in fluency; it is advisable to strengthen the use of subject-specific vocabulary and improve expressive precision.

Learning skills: The student still shows difficulty in the personal re-elaboration of knowledge and in connecting it with broader experiences and themes. A greater awareness of the educational value of the discipline is desirable.

NB: Students with PUOI (or specific learning/accessibility plans) must email the document to the instructors before the exam.

Office hours

Students can contact the instructors via their institutional email address to schedule an appointment.

Programme validity

The course syllabi are valid for two academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

Subject expert: Massimilliano Fantò - massimiliano.fanto@unimib.it

Sustainable Development Goals

NO POVERTY | ZERO HUNGER | GENDER EQUALITY | DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS