

Dr. Pamela A. R. Blakely
mwalimuparb@aol.com

cell: 610-568-5323

Office hours: Before class in our classroom
and by appointment

Storytelling in Africa

AFRC 2230-401, cross-listed in Anthropology and Cinema Studies

Fall 2024

Tuesdays, 5:15 – 8:15

The course focuses on the art of storytelling in Sub-Saharan Africa. Traditional African storytellers entertain, connect past and present, examine cultural values, and obliquely comment on sensitive and controversial issues. African political leaders, social reformers, filmmakers, writers, visual artists, and musicians derive inspiration from storytellers and the imagery, rhetorical strategies, and wisdom of their stories.

Course topics include processes of signification and interpretation, narrative structure of the ubiquitous trickster tale, storytellers' lives, stylistic attributes of performed stories, African folktales in the Diaspora, and oral narrative as inspiration for films. The course also addresses challenges of representation and translation as nonverbal gestural, facial, musical, spatial, and paralinguistic devices are integral to oral performance.

Course Texts

Bascom, William. *African Folktales in the New World*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana

University Press, 1992. Available at [https://www-jstor-](https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/action/doAdvancedSearch?group=none&q0=bascom&q1=&q2=&q3=&q4=&q5=&q6=&sd=&ed=&pt=&isbn=&f0=au&c1=AND&f1=all&c2=AND&f2=all&c3=AND&f3=all&c4=AND&f4=all&c5=AND&f5=all&c6=AND&f6=all&acc=on&la=&jc.ResearchinAfricanLiteratures=j100340&so=old)

[org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/action/doAdvancedSearch?group=none&q0=bascom&q1=&q2=&q3=&q4=&q5=&q6=&sd=&ed=&pt=&isbn=&f0=au&c1=AND&f1=all&c2=AND&f2=all&c3=AND&f3=all&c4=AND&f4=all&c5=AND&f5=all&c6=AND&f6=all&acc=on&la=&jc.ResearchinAfricanLiteratures=j100340&so=old](https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/action/doAdvancedSearch?group=none&q0=bascom&q1=&q2=&q3=&q4=&q5=&q6=&sd=&ed=&pt=&isbn=&f0=au&c1=AND&f1=all&c2=AND&f2=all&c3=AND&f3=all&c4=AND&f4=all&c5=AND&f5=all&c6=AND&f6=all&acc=on&la=&jc.ResearchinAfricanLiteratures=j100340&so=old)

Domowitz, Susan. "An Ethnography of Storytelling in Two Anyi Communities (Ivory Coast)." PhD dissertation, Folklore Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN:

Indiana University Press, 1988. Available free online at <https://tinyurl.com/yar2js6j>

(ProQuest dissertations in Franklin Catalog (UMI:8910141)).

Banda, Tito. *Old Nyaviyuyi in Performance*. Luwingu, Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Publications, 2006.

Additional articles and book excerpts, listed below in the Weekly Schedule, will be shared as electronic files (denoted by “EF”) or online. Students can stream most course films via the link on our Canvas course site.

Assignments

There are four expectations in this class:

- (1) Readings and class participation: 10%
- (2) Film journals: 30%
- (3) Weekly activities (choose 6 out of 12): 30%
- (4) Term paper: 30%

Readings

Ahead of each indicated class, please read the assigned readings and attend class regularly prepared to discuss the readings. Readings include passages from (a) the Course Texts listed above, (b) online sources with provided URL, and (c) electronic files (“EF”) that will be provided to you. All are listed below in the “Weekly Schedule.” All sources are listed in the Source List at the end of this Syllabus.

Film Journal

If you skim the “Weekly Schedule” below you will see that there are films planned for almost every class session. Keep a journal of your reactions to these films, including information you learned from the films, questions they raise, and connections you see with course readings, discussions, and other films. The journal entry for each film should be at least one page long, written in a personal, informal style. Plan to turn in your journal writings the week following. They will be read and responded to promptly so we can dialogue about your thoughts. You will then resubmit the entire semester’s journal, with a complete table of contents, at the end of the semester, so keep your journals when they are handed back.

Weekly Activities

There are twelve weekly in-class activities, described in the Weekly Schedule below. You will be expected to complete six of them. These activities are designed to guide you to think through concepts and apply your learning to a focused exercise. A weekly activity is due no later than one week after it is assigned. It should be uploaded on Canvas. Activities are longer and more formal than film journals. Plan to write at least 600 words.

Term Paper

The fourth expectation is that you prepare an 8–10 page term paper on a topic of your choice related to a topic in African folklore. *The Encyclopedia of African Folklore* (Philip Peek and Kwesi Yankah, eds., 2004) is a good source for term paper topics. This reference work is available as an ebook through the Franklin Catalog https://franklin.library.upenn.edu/catalog/FRANKLIN_9977151056703681

You will need to submit a term paper proposal by October 31. At the end of the term you will submit the paper and also make a short presentation to the class so others can benefit from your work.

There are no exams in this course

Weekly Schedule (Subject to modification)

Week 1 (August 27)

Folktale Relevance in Africa Today

Groups and Locations: Kikuyu, Kenya.

Read: “Electronic File” (EF) Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed* (2006), pp. 49–52, 309–315.

Films we will watch in class: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZ_y8Efrbl8; excerpts from *Taking Root*.

Activity 1 (in class): Read the story *Konyeki na Ithe* ‘Konyeki and His Father’. Write down lessons the story teaches you, without referring to any other materials. Then read Wangari Maathai’s discussion of the meaning of the story to her. Compare your interpretations in class discussion. (You may write up this work as your first of 6 weekly activities.)

Week 2 (September 3)

Interpreting Stories in Cultural and Literary Context

Groups and Locations: Akamba, Kenya; Madagascar; Tiv and Igbo, Nigeria

Read: Laura Bohannon “Shakespeare in the Bush,” in *Natural History* (1966)

http://web.mnstate.edu/robertsb/110/IRC_Shakespeare_in_the_Bush.pdf (please download to read); and provided EF: William Bascom “African Dilemma Tales: An Introduction” in Richard M. Dorson *African Folklore* (1972), pp. 143–155; John S. Mbiti *Akamba Stories* (1966), pp. 3–4; 11–12; 21–40; 135–140; 238–240.

Film: Angano, Angano

Activity 2: Compare the two variants of the “same story”: “47. The hare, the lion, the hyena, and the crow” on pp. 135–140 and “78. The lion, the hare, their cattle, and the hyena” on pp. 238–240. Both versions were told by Akamba storytellers. What are the differences in the stories? How do these differences change the story and affect the interpretation presented by Mbiti?

Week 3 (September 10)

Survey of African Prose Narrative

Read: Ruth Finnegan Ch. 13 “Prose Narratives II: Content and Form,” in *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), pp. 327–378 and also “Adamu and Ifu” pp. 313–318 of the same volume—available online at <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/6fde2200-2c9e-48cc-8fc7-d556ee6a90b3/633751.pdf>; EF: Dan Ben-Amos “Folklore in African Society,” *Research in African Literatures* (1975) 6(2):165–172; “Amadou Kekediourou, Savior of His Family” told by Bilali Tamboura.

Film: Kirikou and the Sorceress

Activity 3a: Compare and contrast “Adamu and Ifu” with Genesis 2:4–3:24 of the Christian Bible (you can look up the passage online, check out different translations). Assuming that the story previously heard by the narrator closely parallels the Genesis story, highlight the differences. What do these changes suggest about Limba culture?

Activity 3b (alternative activity): Compare the source tale “Amadou Kekediourou, Savior of His Family” to the *Kirikou* animated film.

Week 4 (September 17)

Ruth Finnegan’s Pioneering Study of Limba “Story-telling”

Groups and Locations: Limba, Sierra Leone

Read: EF: Ruth Finnegan “The Arts and Action of Limba Story-telling,” and “Stories of Africa—Stories about Africa,” in *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa*

(2007), pp. 43–70 (top); “The dog and the wheel,” told by Suri Kamara and “The clever cat,” told by Kirinkoma Konteh, recorded, transcribed, and translated by Finnegan in *Limba Stories and Story-telling* (1967), p. 270–272 and 333–334.

Films: Mabela the Clever; “How the Earth Was Born”, excerpt from *Benin, an African Kingdom, part 1* and “The Rainbow Store”, excerpt from *Benin, an African Kingdom, part 5*.

Activity 4: Ruth Finnegan once said that she was pleased to see the children’s book *Mabela the Clever* – which was inspired by the text she collected in “The clever cat” – and that she had given it to her grandchildren (personal communication). If you were reviewing the film (or book) for the *Journal of African Children’s and Youth Literature*, what would be your key points?

Week 5 (September 24)

African Tricksters

Domowitz “An Ethnography of Storytelling in Two Anyi Communities (Ivory Coast),” (1988) Front matter p. x and Ch. 3, pp. 86–118 (pdf online); Okpewho, Ch. 7 “Formalism. 175–178; EF: Ben-Amos (1975), pp. 180–186; Lee Haring “A Characteristic African Folktale Pattern” in Dorson (1972), pp. 165–179; Oyekan Owomoyela, “Tricksters in African Folklore,” in Philip Peek and Kwesi Yankah *African Folklore, An Encyclopedia* (2004), pp. 476–477.

Films: Kwaku Anansi; various Anansi animated stories, Anansi Masters

Activity 5: Apply Dundes’ “five functions” pattern and Haring’s “characteristic African folktale pattern” to an Anyi trickster story in Domowitz (1988) or another African trickster tale.

Week 6 (October 1)

Brer Rabbit and Anansi, African Tricksters in the Diaspora

Read Excerpt from Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*. EF: William Bascom *African Folktales in the New World* (1992), pp. title page–xxv; two provided versions of “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story”: as printed in Joel Chandler Harris *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* (1955), pp. 6–8 and retold in Julius Lester *Uncle Remus, The Complete Tales* (1999), pp. 10–16 (n.b. this story was originally printed in Joel Chandler Harris *Uncle Remus His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), pp. 7–8); Zora Neal Hurston “High John de

Conquer" (1943) printed in Alan Dundes *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (1990), pp. 541–548; Lorenzo D. Turner "Problems Confronting the Investigator of Gullah" (1947) in Dundes (1990), pp. 126–135; Bernard Wolfe "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit" (1949) in Dundes (1990), pp. 524–540.

Film: Anansi (told by Denzel Washington with music by UB40).

Activity 6: Choose one of the nine African tale types for which William Bascom has identified an Uncle Remus version (#'s 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 13). Read the Uncle Remus version of this type in Harris (1955). Compare the Uncle Remus version to the other versions described by Bascom, making note of the geographical distribution of the tale.

Week 7 (October 8)

Stylistic Qualities of Oral Performance – From Spoken to Written Representation

Groups and Locations: Ewe, Togo; Haya, Tanzania; BaTumbuka, Malawi; Northern Zambia

Read: Okpewho, Ch. 3, pp. 42 - 69; Domowitz, Ch. 4, pp. 155–173; excerpts from Tito Bana, *Old Nyaviyuyi in Performance*, pp. 1 - 13 and Robert Cancel, *Storytelling in Northern Zambia*. **EF:** Ben-Amos (1975), pp. 172–180; Zinta Konrad "Style in Performance," Ch. 6 in *Ewe Comic Heroes, Trickster Tales in Togo* (1994), pp. 93–130, 183–192; Peter Seitel Ch. 2 "Storytelling Performance," in *See So That We May See* (1980), pp. 26–48.

Film: Video recording of storytelling performance in Ch. 6 of Konrad "Spider Removes the Mill"

Activity 7: Assess the effectiveness of Konrad, Seitel, Banda, and Cancel in representing the qualities of oral performance discussed by Okpewho in Ch. 3.

Week 8 (October 15)

Storytellers, Answerers, and Audiences

Groups and Locations: Anyi, Ivory Coast; Bini (Benin Kingdom) Tiv, Nigeria and Kpelle, Sierra Leone

Read: Domowitz, Ch. 4, pp. 133–154; **EF:** Dan Ben-Amos "The Elusive Audience of Benin Narrators" (1972) in *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 9(2/3):177–184; Ben-Amos (1975), pp.

186–191; Ruth Stone “Bringing the Extraordinary into the Ordinary: Music Performance among the Kpelle of Liberia,” in Blakely et al, *Religion in Africa* (1994), pp. 388–397.

Films: Baka, People of the Forest; excerpt from Mazrui, *The Africans*, part 2 “Legacy of Life Styles”.

Activity 8: Deep in the forest, by the light of the moon, a band elder tells a story about a monkey stealing a human baby from the riverbank while his mother is fishing. Describe the stylistic qualities of oral performance exemplified here. Also discuss what you can learn about the storyteller and the social and cultural context of his tale from the remainder of the film *Baka: People of the Forest*.

Week 9 (October 22)

Storytelling in Family and Community Context

Groups and Locations: Anyi, Ivory Coast; Senegal; BaChokwe, Democratic Republic of Congo; Lebou, Senegal

Read: Domowitz, Ch. 3, pp. 83–86, Chs. 5–6, pp. 200–295; **ER:** Ben-Amos (1975), pp. 191–193; Susan Domowitz “Wearing Proverbs: Anyi Names for Printed Factory Cloth” (1992) in *African Arts* 25(3):82–87+104; Rachel I. Fretz “Through Ambiguous Tales: Women's Voices in Chokwe Storytelling,” *Oral Tradition* (1994) 9:230-250; Albertine Itela “Interview with Monsour Sora Wade” (2002).

Films: The Storyteller with Professor Harold Scheub; Fary l’anesse, Picc Mi, Monsour Sora Wade, dir. (Senegal)

Activity 9: Explain the concept of “oblique communication” in African storytelling. Refer in your paper to Domowitz’s 1988 case study of a family conflict, pp. 266–291, Domowitz (1992), and Scheub’s recounting of a grandmother’s gift of a story to her two grandsons.

Week 10 (October 29)

Performing Tales told by Nyaviyuyi of Malawi

Activity 10

In class, individually or with other class members, retell a story from the 7 stories folktale collection using illustrations or other visual art, video, music, poetry, and/or a theater skit.

Turn in your paragraph-length term paper proposal and sources list by October 31

Week 11 (November 5)

Monsour Sora Wade, *Lebou* Folklore in Film

Read: Domowitz on legend pp. 72–83; Okpewho on legend pp. 183–203.

Film: *Prix du Pardon*, Monsour Sora Wade, dir. (Senegal)

Activity 11: Evaluate whether or not the film *Prix du Pardon* can be classified as a “legend.” Refer to Domowitz and Okpewho writings on “legend” in your response.

Week 12 (November 12) Class Cancelled

Use this week to make progress on your term paper and any outstanding activities and journals.

Week 13 (November 19) No class per Penn schedule (replaced by other classes regularly meeting Thursdays)

Week 14 (November 26)

African Epic, *Yeelen*, “the greatest African film ever made”

Bambara, Peul (Fulani), and Dogon peoples of Mali.

Read: Daniel Biebuyck, “The African Heroic Epic,” in *Heroic Epic and Saga* (1978), pp. 336 - 367“ER: Suzanne MacRae “Yeelen”: A Political Fable of the “Komo”

Blacksmiths/Sorcerers” in *Research in African Literatures* (1995) 26(3):57–66; Patrick McNaughton “Blacksmiths: Mande of Western Africa,” in Peek and Yankah (2004), pp. 30–32.

Film: *Yeelen*, Souleymane Cissé, dir. (Mali), available streaming through Franklin Catalog

Activity 12a: Compare the plot of the film *Yeelen* to the plots of West African epics – the Monzon Cycle, the Silamaka Epic, and the Sunjata Epic -- in Biebuyck 1978. Be sure to consider the section “Content and Structure” as well as the plot summaries.

Week 15 (December 3)

Contemporary Griot/Actor Sotigui Kouyaté

Read: ER: Thomas Hale, "Griots and Griottes" in Peek and Yankah (2007), pp. 162–164; Eva Jorholt "Africa's Modern Cinematic Griot–Oral Tradition and West African Cinema", in Maria E. Baaz and Mai Palmberg *Same and Other, Negotiating African Identity in Cultural Production* (2001), pp. 95–118.

Films: *Sotigui Kouyaté*; excerpt from *Names Live Nowhere*; excerpt from *La Gènesse* (Genesis), Cheick Oumar Sissoko, dir. (Bambara, Mali); excerpt from *Keïta, Heritage of the Griot*, Dani Kouyate, dir. (Burkina Faso), streaming through Franklin Catalog

Activity 12b: In what ways can Sotigui Kouyaté and Dani Kouyaté be considered "cinematic griots"? Do you think "cinematic griot" is a useful term?

Week 16 (December 10)

Presentations of Term Projects in lieu of Final Exam, all remaining assignments due by Dec. 31.

NB: If anyone would prefer to present IN PERSON on December 17, I will add an additional class meeting on that day. Otherwise we will meet for the last time on December 10.