COM 138: International Rhetoric: Wisdom Traditions in Africa, Asia, and South America

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I. Class Description:

This course will illuminate wisdom intellectual traditions drawn from three major geographical areas – Africa, Asia, and South America. The class will revolve around the following articulations of wisdom: i) Knowledge ii) Ethics iii) and Meaning.

i) Knowledge: We will examine the epistemic and ontological questions raised by particular wisdom traditions, and, closely related to that, offer a scrutiny of the justifications offered by these wisdom traditions.

ii) Ethics: We will examine the meta-ethical, ethical, and political questions raised by wisdom traditions.

iii) Meaning: We will examine articulations of what makes life worth living in various wisdom traditions and what these traditions articulate as the life well lived.
Thinking Globally Learning Outcomes:

1. Students can describe differences between at least two cultures (one of which is non-western) and can offer explanations or historical contexts for those differences.

- This course aims at the following learning outcomes:
  - Interpretive Understanding (*Verstehen*): *Verstehen*, a term which I have drawn from the social theorist Max Weber, describes a methodology for *interpreting* and *understanding* societies and culture. Interpreting involves the *discovery* of a belief or pattern of behavior; and, closely following from that, the ability to determine its *meaning* (its significance within a web of meaning). Understanding involves a *participatory* or empathetic knowledge of how it feels like to be a particular person. Understanding is not so much knowledge-*that* as knowledge-*how*.

  Here is an example: One of the most salient and prominent practices in many African polities are communal events organized around dance and masquerade, call and response storytelling, sculpting and carving. What is the *meaning* of these events? In other words, how do they function *rhetorically*? Among the Igbo, to take just one example, they are, first of all, *ways of knowing*; a means of imparting knowledge not through propositions but rather through participation. Second, they are manifestations of a *metaphysics* of “dynamism” and constant flux. Third, they legitimate a *politics* of change, deliberation, and peaceable contestation. Fourth, they articulate an *ethics* that seeks to affirm both the community and the individual (thus, Igbo dances are expected to both cite other dances and offer brilliant improvisations). This class will seek to draw students into an understanding and appreciation of the rich meanings of worlds that polities such as the Igbo construct through their stories and performances. In addition to this, students will be able to compare the meaning of these stories with those found in Western culture. Thus, for example, the Igbo “aesthetic” is strikingly different from a Western conception of the aesthetic as “autonomous” or divorced from the ordinary, the ethical, or the political – a “product” to be contemplated and collected or a form of entertainment.
o Explanation (*Erklären* or causal explanation): Causal explanation in this class will be an attempt to discover and interpret what moves people to believe what they do and to act as they do. The explanations we will examine will be mainly *historical* and *structural* explanations.

- **Here is an example:** We will explore how identities – such as “racial” or “ethnic” identities – that have often been claimed to be immutable are actually *rhetorical* constructions. Thus, this class will examine how, on the one hand, identities have been wielded to achieve certain ends. We will examine, for example, how Westerners have represented Africans, Asians, and South Americans in various rhetorical artifacts. Second, we will also examine the force and power that these constructions of identities have had on others. For example, we will examine the emergence of so-called “tribal” identities in Africa during European colonialism.

- **Articulation:** The course is *comparative* and will therefore help students think about the relationships not only among these intellectual traditions, but also with that of the “West.” The very idea of “tradition” will itself be an object of study. We will explore not only what makes a phenomenon a “tradition,” but also how that “tradition” is deployed rhetorically.

  **Here is an example:** “Non-Western” cultures have historically been dismissed in the West as “irrational.” So what then is rationality? We will critically explore the idea of rationality. For example, Amartya Sen has drawn attention to the longstanding tradition of public argumentation in India. This tradition fostered a robust culture of heterodoxy, skepticism, and religious tolerance that belie characterizations of the South Asian East as inferior to the supposedly “rational” West. We will engage in a comparative evaluation of forms of rationality such as “instrumental” rationality; “epistemic” rationality; and “communicative” rationality.

2. Students recognize the value and significance of other cultures without romanticizing:

- **Value:** This class will engage deep questions on what these wisdom intellectual traditions teach on knowledge; what they teach on ethics; and what they teach on meaning.

- **Critique:** This class will explore critiques of all the wisdom intellectual traditions studied. These critiques will take the following forms. First, we will historicize and contextualize the intellectual traditions studied; we will explore not only the achievements, triumphs, and lessons that they offer, but also develop an intimate
understanding of their contingencies and corruptions. Second, this class will be rigorously comparative and therefore will explore and debate the attractions and limitations of epistemological and moral relativism.

- **Here is an example:** In this class, we will endeavor to make sense of and learn from the major intellectual breakthroughs and arguments in “non-Western” cultures. For example, among the Igbo of West Africa, knowledge is defined as contextual (as opposed to Platonic or universal). In South Asia, the Buddhist thinker Nagasena argued that the “self” is a construction and derived from this a thoroughgoing critique of selfishness. To the extent that these ideas offer interesting contrasts to the ones that many Westerners have been exposed to, we shall try to understand, learn from, and critique these ideas.

3. Students can identify ways in which cultures influence formulations of knowledge. They will identify ways in which they personally are affected.

- **Knowledges:** We will examine the forms of knowledge articulated by the intellectual traditions and their conditions of possibility. Such forms of knowledge include *episteme, doxa, techne,* and *metis.* We will, conversely, examine the forms of knowledge silenced, marginalized or ruled unthinkable by each intellectual tradition.

- **Self-Knowledge:** Students will be able to identify the form of knowledge that they privilege and should be able to offer justifications for why they privilege certain forms of knowledge.

4. Students recognize global inequities, injustices, and/or inter-religious issues and commit themselves to thoughtful, concrete responses growing out of their Christian faith.

- **Justice:** In light of the forms of knowledge, ethics, and notions of the good life studied, this class will examine contested issues in the global public sphere – from questions of representation in media and politics to different conceptions of justice (retributive, restorative, or distributive).

- **Here is an example:** After apartheid, many South Africans argued that the philosophy of “ubuntu” – “I am because we are” – enjoined the country to a restorative form of justice. They distinguished this form of justice from “retributive” forms of justice prevalent in the West. We will explore the strengths of these different forms of justice and their weaknesses.
5. Students will have an appropriate sense of the limits of their global understanding.
   - Self-Reflexivity: The emphasis throughout this class will be on *self-reflexivity*, that is, a rigorous, often painful, critique of the prejudices, self-deceptions, and selective biases with which we see the world.
   - Imagination: The course will engage students in considering what it would mean to be of a different ethical and cultural identity and to attempt imaginative reconstructions of just worlds.

**Course Texts:**

- *Reading Packet*

Assignments:

1. Representations:

This assignment involves:

- Selecting a newspaper, magazine, journal (such as the *National Geographic*) or novel and conduct a rhetorical critique of its representation of a specific issue, place, person, period or place in Africa, Asia, or South America. Examples include:
  - Newspapers: The *Times* coverage of the the *Mau Mau* rebellion;
  - Novels: Representations of Africa in *The Poisonwood Bible*; John Updike’s *The Coup*; V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*
  - Travel writing such as *Dark Star Safari*, Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Shadow of the Sun*

How this assignment meets the Student Learning Outcomes:

This assignment seeks to discover how cultures that are “non-Western” are portrayed in academic and popular culture. Often, this portrayals hold that the non-Western cultures are “different.” We will explore whether these differences are accurate and what they mean. Beyond that, we will explore in class how these differences came about. For example, African cultures are often portrayed as “tribal.” What then is the “tribe” and how is it different from societies in, say, North America?

What is Rhetorical Criticism? It is the study of the epistemological stances, the truth or falsity, the style, and the aesthetic value of a variety of political, economic, and cultural artifacts.
2. Rhetorical Criticism: Metaphysics, Ethics, and Meaning

Read one of the following and offer a rhetorical criticism of it:

- Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*
- Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*
- Miguel Angel Asturias, *Men of Maize*
- Rosario Castellanos, *The Book of Lamentations*
- Sembene Ousmane, *God’s Bits of Wood*
- WU Cheng’en, *Journey to the West*, trans. WJF Jenner

How this assignment meets the Student Learning Outcomes:

These books are rich narratives that articulate the metaphysical presuppositions and ethical commitments of various cultures in Africa, Asia and South America. In reading these narratives, students will enter different worlds and compare their values and assumptions to the values and assumptions that they hold.

3. Rhetorical Criticism: Politics and Identity

Watch one of the following and conduct a rhetorical critique of it:

- Sembene Ousmane’s *Faat-Kiine*
- Sembene Ousmane’s *Moolaade*
- Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*
- *The Emperor and the Assassin*

How this assignment meets the Student Learning Outcomes:

These films offer rich accounts of the ideological contestations in African and Asian polities. These films articulate the conflict between ideological stances such as conservativism versus feminism; pacifism versus militarism. Students will also explore how these films engage questions of justice and meaning in non-Western contexts.

- Write an essay making an argument on the definition and dimensions of “wisdom.” Draw on the materials we have learned in this class – articulate a meta-ethics of wisdom; the form and style of wisdom; and offer an imaginative vision of the individual, relational, and societal legacies that you hope your conception of “wisdom” will engender. Choose a specific text; thinker; or issue in Africa, Asia, or South America and offer a critique or insight on the text, thinker and issue using your articulation of wisdom.

How this assignment meets the Student Learning Outcomes:
This assignment will encourage students to reflect on what they have learned. It aims at encouraging self-reflexivity and intellectual humility. It is my hope that students will offer searching examinations of the limits of their understanding and thereby learn to seek out wisdom from contexts that they have not hitherto considered.

Student Needs:
If you have special circumstances (such as a learning disability, academic or athletic team schedule) that I should be aware of, please inform me before the second week. Arrangements to accommodate your need must be made well in advance of any exams or assignments.

Class Policies

I. Paper Specification:

i) Assignments are due the beginning of the class hour, unless otherwise noted.

ii) Your professor will not accept late papers, unless the circumstances are verifiably extenuating. If unable to attend class on the day an assignment is due, ask a friend to hand in your assignment for you. Do not turn in assignments by email. Your professor will not accept these.

iii) No computer excuses are accepted. If for some reason your computer does not work the morning before presenting your paper or you run out of printing paper and you are
unable to turn in your paper, please do not ask for an extension (my obvious answer is: why did you wait until the last minute to get your work done?

iv) I need you to take full responsibility for the professionalism of your work on your paper. I will return to you, ungraded and/or severely marked down, any paper that:

- is unstapled
- is missing page numbers on the pages
- is lacking standard margins (around 1 inch each side) or fonts (12)
- is not double-spaced is full of grammatical and/or spelling errors on the first page.
- is not in Times New Roman style

v) All significant papers (that is, that have 2 or more pages) should have a cover page according to the Chicago Manual of Style. The cover page should have your name, type of assignment, title of the paper, the class, and date that you presented the paper.

vi) Use the Chicago Manual of Style in all your citations (with footnotes).

vii) You are not allowed to cite online sources (that is, from the WorldWide Web, usually derived from sources such as Wikipedia or from search engines such as Google and Yahoo) in the research you conduct in this class (if this is absolutely necessary, please clear the online sources with me). By “online sources,” I do not mean information derived from the library databases (such as Ebsco). Do not – under any circumstances – use Wikipedia as a source for your articles.

viii) Plagiarism will earn you an automatic F in the assignment for a first offense and an automatic F in the course for a second offense. I may seek further disciplinary action from the department and the school administration.

II. Class Attendance:

i) I'll take attendance.

ii) Classroom participation matters. Your grade will also depend on your participation. I will call on students by name to respond to specific questions and these questions will be assessed as part of your engagement points. The engagements are all unannounced. More often I will ask a student to summarize the assignment. My hope is that you will read more out of a desire to know than the fear of punishment.

iii) While you can use laptops to take notes, do not abuse this privilege by surfing the internet or playing games on your laptop. Should your professor discover that you are doing this, you will be asked to leave the classroom and play outside.
iv) Please take notes during the speech presentations delivered by your classmates. You will be tested on these. Pay particular attention to the following: the major thesis of the speech; the speeches’ major points; and lastly, offer a critique of the strength and weaknesses of the arguments in the speech.

III. Communication with Professor:

i) If you are dissatisfied with a grade, please see me in my office. Do not disrupt class time with queries about your grade.

ii) Let’s keep the lines of communication open. Approach me (in the right context) and tell me whatever is bothering you. I will listen to your query or request and consider it respectfully and thoroughly. I am particularly appreciative of those that have the moral fortitude to directly face me with what is troubling them rather than make snide comments to others.
Tentative Course Schedule

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>READINGS</th>
<th>ASSIGNMENTS DUE</th>
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**Week 1:**

**Monday:**

Introduction to the class: Context for the Class:

**Wednesday:**

- What is Communication Studies?
- What does Communication Studies have to do with “Wisdom”?

**Friday:**

What is Wisdom?

**Week 2:**

**Monday:**

The Rhetorical Construction of Identity:

- The Myth of the “West” vs. the “Rest”

**Wednesday:**

The Rhetorical Construction of Identity:

- The invention of the Other: Representation and Race

**Friday:**

The invention of “Africa” “Asia” and “Latin America”

**Reading:**

- Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*
**Week 3:**

**Monday:**

The Rhetorical Architectonic of Society: Centripetal (Identity) and Centripetal (Pluralist) Forces

**Reading:**

- Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*

**Wednesday:**

The Rhetorical Articulation of Metaphysics:

**Reading:**

- Kwasi Wiredu, *African Religion*
- Jack Goody, “Creation and Evolution” in *Food and Love*

**Friday:**

The Rhetorical Articulation of Metaphysics: Narrative, Myth, Storytelling

**Reading:**


**Week 4:**

**Monday:**

The Rhetorical Construction of Metaphysics: Myth and Metaphysics

- Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*
- Confucius, *Analects*
Wednesday: Myth and Metaphysics

- Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire* Trilogy: vol. 1 *Genesis*

Friday:

Presentations of Representations Paper

Week 5:

Monday:

The Rhetorical Construction of Knowledge

Reading:

- Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*
- Jack Goody, *Doubt*

Wednesday:

Types of Knowledges:

Readings:

- Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*

Friday:

Rationality and Argumentation:

Reading:

- Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *On Reason: Rationality for a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism*
- Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*
**Week 6:**

**Monday:**

The effects and legacies of rationalities:

**Reading:**

- Environmental care (Jared Diamond on the Maya)
- James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*

**Wednesday:**

- Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*

**Friday:**

- Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*

**Mid-Term Exam**

**Week 7:**

**Monday:**

The Rhetorical Articulation of Ethics:

**Wednesday:**

Ubuntu

**Readings:**


**Friday:**

The Ethics of Narratives
• Chinese short stories
• Grace Ogot, *Tekayo*

**Week 8:**

**Monday:**
The Ethics of Emotions

• Morality: Honor, Shame, Guilt, Anger

Wednesday

Different types of Self:

Friday:

• Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*

**Week 8:**

Monday:

Presentations on Rhetorical Criticism:

Politics

Wednesday:

Presentation on Rhetorical Criticism

Friday:

Presentation on Rhetorical Criticism

**Week 9:**

Politics:

Wednesday:
Feminism

Reading:


Friday:

Justice:

Reading:

• Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*

**Week 10:**

Monday:

Reading:

• Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*

Wednesday:

Identity, Pluralism, Nationalism, and Cosmopolitanism:

Reading:

• Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*

Friday:

Presentation on Film Criticism

**Week 11:**

Monday:

The Meaning of Meaning: What Makes Life Meaningful?

Reading:

Wednesday:

• Radical Hope

Reading:

• Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*

Friday:

• Radical Hope

Reading:

• Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*

**Week 12:**

Monday:

Aesthetics

Reading:

• Zhang Longxi, "The Utopian Vision, East and West" *Utopian Studies* (2002)

Wednesday:

Reading:

• Edward Said, “Resistance and Opposition” in *Culture and Imperialism*

Friday:

• Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*

**Week 13:**
Thanksgiving Holiday

**Week 14:**

Monday:

Reconciliation

**Wednesday:**

South Africa’s TRC; *Gacaca* courts

**Week 15**

Final Presentations

**Week 16 Final Exam**