This course explores the important role played by disease and healing traditions in sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the encounter between European colonial medicine and African societies in the 19th and 20th centuries and the therapeumatic and medical cultures which grew out of these interactions. It begins with the smallpox epidemics that ravaged the indigenous Khoekhoe at the Cape Colony in the eighteenth century and concludes with HIV/AIDS in contemporary South Africa, the global epidemic’s epicentre. Special attention is paid to the former British colonies and to the Southern African region, although comparative perspectives form an essential aspect of this course, and students are free to write about other regions of Africa in their long essays. By focusing on disease and epidemics as forces of historical change -- smallpox, malaria, sleeping sickness and AIDS for example -- and on the interactions and exchanges between western biomedicine with African healing cultures and knowledge systems, the course seeks to develop an understanding of wider patterns in the social, cultural and political history of colonial and post-colonial Africa. Topics covered include ‘diseases of beasts’; ‘the white man’s grave’; missionary medicine; colonial constructions of African sexuality, ‘psychiatry and the native mind’.

Recommended Reading


M. Vaughan, 'Healing and Curing: Issues in the Social History and Anthropology of Medicine in Africa’, *Social History and Medicine*, 7, 2, 1994


M. Malowany, 'Unfinished Agendas: Writing the History of Medicine of Sub-Saharan Africa' in African Affairs, 395, 2000

S. Marks, 'What is Colonial about Colonial Medicine? And What has Happened to Imperialism and Health', Social History of Medicine, 10/02. 1997

Poonam Bala ed. Medicine and Colonialism: Historical Perspectives in India and South Africa (2014)