



Seminar

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*Health and Illness in African History:
Sources, Approaches and Challenges*

Tuesday, 12 April, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
www.swedishcollegium.se

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ABOUT REBEKAH LEE

Rebekah Lee is Senior Lecturer in History at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She has published work on South African history and culture, including the book *African Women and Apartheid: Migration and Settlement in Urban South Africa* (2009). Her research interests span issues of health, gender, migration, urbanization, religion, identity and material culture. Her most recent major project, a study of death and memory in modern South Africa, was part of a broader collaboration on the history of death in Africa from 1800 to the present day (see www.gold.ac.uk/deathinafrica). In 2011–12, she was a Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. In 2012, she directed her first documentary, ‘The Price of Death’, on the township funeral business in South Africa. The film won the Richard Werbner Award for Visual Ethnography at the Royal Anthropological Institute’s International Festival for Ethnographic Film in 2013. Lee holds degrees from Harvard University (B.A.) and the University of Oxford (M.Phil. and D.Phil.), and has taught at universities in the United Kingdom, the United States and South Africa.

During her stay at SCAS, Lee will work on the book ‘Health, Healing and Illness in African History’. This book will offer, for the first time, a comprehensive introduction to the history of African health and healing from the pre-colonial period to the present day, emphasizing Africans’ own understanding and management of health and illness. It will utilize case studies from across the African continent and an innovative interdisciplinary perspective drawing on scholarship from history, anthropology, human geography, public health and development studies.

ABSTRACT

This talk introduces some of the central themes, debates and intellectual frameworks relevant to the study of health and illness in African history, from the pre-colonial period to the present day. It emphasizes that ‘health’ and ‘illness’ are more than simply bio-medical states of being—they connote complex processes of interaction, conflict and change amongst competing healing systems; they reflect deeper notions of perception and representation; and they are embedded in social, political and economic realities. I provide a brief historiography of the subject by locating the emergence of a vibrant and interdisciplinary scholarship on health and illness in Africa in the convergence of medical, political and intellectual developments in the latter half of the twentieth century, and then reflect on important methodological challenges, including the limitations of available primary source material and the historical ‘recovery’ of indigenous African perceptions and practices.

The latter half of the talk turns to illustrating more concretely some of the problems and possibilities of interdisciplinary historical approaches for the study of health, healing and illness, through historicizing the current HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. Although HIV/AIDS is entering into its fourth decade on the African continent, academic and media analyses of the epidemic continue to be conducted largely in the present tense. The talk situates HIV/AIDS in a broader history of sexually transmitted disease in Africa, and seeks to draw connections with earlier sexual health ‘crises’ such as the syphilis ‘epidemic’ during the colonial period in southern and central Africa. Anxieties around African sexuality and its regulation, within colonial as well as subsequent African polities, contributed to powerfully gendered perceptions of and approaches to these diseases. One of the lingering continuities in western approaches between colonial-era syphilis and HIV/AIDS is that African sexual behaviour was disaggregated from the larger moral and spiritual sphere within which sexual activity was regulated and understood. This has resulted in largely failed attempts to influence sexual behaviour and sexual norms in preventative and treatment campaigns, and has obscured the workings of more complex psycho-social processes (which are themselves historically embedded) such as shame and stigma which have shaped Africans’ management of sexual health and disease over the longue duree. I end by considering how the insertion of HIV/AIDs into a broader historiography of sexually transmitted disease in Africa may usefully transform our understanding of how we may recover and understand the health experiences of Africans, and in particular of African women. For example, the AIDS pandemic has yielded a voluminous array of largely first-person ‘confessional’ narrative accounts (textual, visual and video) of HIV+ persons’ experiences of their illness, and these various sources potentially fundamentally challenge the existing archive on which historical studies of health and illness in Africa have been based.