

Technology Studies in Africa
Mellon Workshop
July 11-14, 2016 • Durban, South Africa

What happened to the study of technology in Africa?

When African studies first took off as an academic field, economic historians, archaeologists, and other scholars paid significant attention to technological artifacts and technological change. To be sure, some treated African technologies as metonyms for backwardness, while others limited themselves to linking raw material extraction and human exploitation in Africa to the industrial success of Europe and North America. Other scholars, however, explored technologies as purveyors of power, containers of culture, and instruments of social dynamics. The rich literature on precolonial metalworking is a case in point.

Yet as African studies expanded – as colonial and postcolonial archives opened, as oral history became academically respectable, as gender and ethnicity became objects of critical study – studies of technology occupied a smaller and smaller place in the field. With the growing commitment and ability to understand African societies on their own terms, the material textures of those societies fell into scholarly obscurity, even (in some instances) disrepute.

Over the last 10-15 years, the tide has begun to shift again. Scholars trained in the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies (STS) have looked to the African continent for new approaches to epistemology and ontology. Medical historians and anthropologists have attended increasingly to the role of artifacts in health and healing. STS-infused approaches to political economy have integrated African places and people into studies of commodities such as groundnuts, skin lighteners, or uranium. Media technologies, especially radio, have attracted attention as instruments of nationalism, war, and liberation. Historians have re-interpreted the role of guns in colonial times, analyzing their complex political and cultural lives within African polities and between Africans and European settlers. Renewed attention to mobility as a major theme within African studies has led scholars to examine the instruments and infrastructures of transport. Indeed, infrastructure has become its own topic, both within and outside of African studies. The mania for materiality that has overtaken the humanities makes it impossible to ignore technology in any study of culture.

Taking stock of these developments, this workshop aims to extend the frontiers of technology studies in Africa. We welcome contributions oriented around theoretical themes (such as infrastructure, materiality, technopolitics, mobility, communication, user innovation, and technical knowledge) as well as those focused on empirical topics (such as digital governance, energy production, mineral extraction, war and conflict, food cultivation, cellular telephony, waste management, or tourism).

Standard conference talks and read-aloud papers are banned. Instead, we welcome creative proposals for other presentation formats, including (but not limited to) the following:

- 6-minute Pecha-Kucha talks (20 slides, 20 seconds each, advanced automatically so you can't digress); we hope to have one or two sessions dedicated to this format.

- discussion sessions based on pre-circulated drafts (of articles, dissertation or book chapters, or book proposals)
- structured discussions of thematic flashpoints (for example, you and a partner might offer to lead an hour-long discussion based on 2-3 readings)
- sessions to discuss short videos (documentaries, interviews, video collages designed to spark discussions)
- demos of “digital history” and its uses in teaching, at any level

Feel free to discuss your format ideas with one of us before submitting them.

Proposals should describe your topic and proposed format, in a maximum of 250 words (including the title). **Please submit these to pne@umich.edu by Monday, 5 October 2015.**

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