

Monday, 28.10.2024; 4:15 - 5:45 pm CET

Marcos Leitão de Almeida, University of São Paulo, Brazil

How Oligarchs Reshaped the Language of Slavery in the Kingdom of Kongo (1709–ca. 1880)

Abstract:

The historiography of the Kingdom of Kongo has long emphasized the profound political transformations following the Kongolese Civil War (1665 – 1709), marked by fragmentation, factional violence and the expansion of enslavement in response to Atlantic demands. Central to this narrative is the rise of a class of oligarchs, or “entrepreneurial nobles,” who mobilized political titles and discourses of ancestry to assert their influence as local power brokers and intermediaries in the trans-Atlantic trade of goods and enslaved persons. However, the specific strategies these elites employed to organize their slaving networks, and the political language surrounding such strategies, remain underexplored due to the scarcity of direct references in outsiders’ sources. In this presentation, I discuss how Kongolese oligarchs reshaped the vocabulary of slavery, actively participating in the renewal of Atlantic slavery in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This linguistic transformation underpinned a discourse that increasingly divorced the practice of enslavement from its previous moral constraints, embedding these strategies within the broader political and economic contexts that drove the intensification of slavery in the South Atlantic.

Bio:

Marcos Leitão De Almeida is a newly appointed faculty member in the Department of History at the **University of São Paulo**, Brazil. His research, which focuses on Central African history, has been supported by important organizations such as the American Council of Learned Societies, the Social Science Research Council and the Society of Presidential Fellows at Northwestern University, among others. His work has been published in leading academic outlets, including the *Journal of African History*, *Azania*, the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, and the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*.

Almeida earned his PhD in African History from Northwestern University, and his research has been recognized with several awards, including the *Palmares Foundation Prize* (2013), the *George Romani Prize* (2014), and the *Harold Perkin Prize* (2021).