

Monday, 25.10.2021 16:00 - 18:00 CEST

Marcos Abreu Leitão De Almeida, University of Michigan:

The Problem of Slavery in the Lower Congo: The Categories for 'Slave,' 'Pawn' and 'Captive' in the Longue Durée (ca. 1000 BCE to ca. 1870s)

Abstract:

My work addresses a persistent problem in African history: the deep history of slavery in the Lower Congo region. While historians acknowledge the importance of Lower Congo societies in shaping Atlantic slavery, they rarely consider what slavery meant and how indigenous communities in the region practiced it. This state of affairs has fueled a long-standing debate among historians and anthropologists around two topics: (1) whether 'slavery' emerged in the Lower Congo prior to the arrival of Europeans and (2) whether the very 'institution' of slavery is Eurocentric. In this talk, I show how heuristic categories that historians use to understand slavery—such as thresholds between clientship and slavery, the dichotomy between free and slave, or the distinction between chattel and lineage slavery—misrecognize the original pathway of slavery in this region. Instead, I use interdisciplinary methods to trace the distinct historical moments in which Lower Congo peoples drew on their intellectual traditions to innovate concepts of 'slaves,' 'captives' and 'pawns,' as well as the objects of restraint and techniques of plundering and seizing outsiders. By using historical linguistics to follow the words Lower Congo peoples used to name and frame their slaving strategies, my research proposes four distinct historical contexts when they created slavery: (1) 1100-700 BCE; (2) 100-400 CE; (3) 1100-1400 CE, and (4) 1665-1880. Rather than simply pursuing the 'origins of slavery' in Central Africa, this research puts forward a historical approach, demonstrating how ambitious individuals seeking to establish or secure their position as leaders resorted to slaving as a crucial strategy to consolidate power in contexts of new demographic, ecological, or material opportunities over 3,000 years of Lower Congolese history.

Bio:

Marcos Leitão De Almeida is the Emerging Voices Fellow at the University of Michigan's Center for Social Solutions. His research has been supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, Social Science Research Council, and the Society of Presidential Fellows at Northwestern University, among others. His work has appeared in various publications, such as the Journal of African History, Azania, and the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History. Almeida received his PhD in African History from Northwestern University, and his research has won a number of prizes over the years, such as the Palmares Foundation Prize (2013), The George Romani Prize (2014) and the Harold Perkin Prize (2021).