We argue that participant observation of institutions, such as ritual initiation, provides ethnographers with insight in experiential-sensorial structures whose relevance continues across generations and thus offers an invaluable tool of analysis of those institutions to historians as well. In the present case, initiation into the spirit cult of the Chwezi dynasty outlines a semantic field and underlying sensorial structure with which to analyze the oral history of twenty tales covering four centuries of dynastic wars in Rwanda. A method is proposed so as to lay bare in the narration (by Gakaniisha) of successive epochs the long-term cultural process that gave birth to the Rwandan institution of kingship, comprising changes in spirit reciprocity, divination, sacred/secular ritual, autocracy, ethnicity, and nation building. By combining structuralist methods with both phenomenology and diachrony, we challenge the views on culture by ‘un-anthropologized’ historians and ‘a-historical’ anthropologists alike.

Date: Tuesday, 19.04.2016
Venue: South Asia Institute, Room Z10
Time: 16.15 – 17.45