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Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Muey Saeteurn, HCRES Associate Professor

By Dalila Barragan & Brooke Acebo

Dalila Barragan (DB): During the 2024-2025 academic year, I served as the first History Program intern under Professor Muey Saeteurn. I have also had the opportunity to take her classes at UC Merced, and it is a great honor to interview her alongside Brooke Acebo, Dr. Saeteurn also serves as the Program Chair for the History Department, providing many opportunities for history students. In the time I've been at UC Merced, Dr. Saeteurn has made a significant impact on many students on campus and for this reason, we are both very excited to interview her as the Faculty Spotlight for the 2025 issue of the HCRES Journal.

Brooke Acebo (BA): Dr. Saeteurn, we were hoping you could tell us about your path and motivation to work in academia, and why did you pick East Africa as your research specialty?

Muey Saeteurn (MS): I actually went to college thinking I would become a high school history teacher, specifically a US history teacher. I never considered or dreamed of becoming a college professor, as that was never on my radar growing up. I am the first in my immediate family to graduate from high school, then college, and to earn my master's and PhD, so academia was quite foreign to my family and me. It wasn't until my third year of undergraduate studies that I learned professors did more than teach; they also conducted research in addition to being in the classroom. At San Jose State, I was part of the Humanities Honors Program, where a professor asked me one day, while I was walking with him to his office hours, whether I had ever considered going to graduate school and obtaining a PhD. I honestly didn't even know what that degree entailed, so I had to ask him.

This was the moment when a new life path opened up for me. He explained what a doctorate was and told me about the McNair Scholars Program, a federal TRIO program designed to prepare undergraduate students who are either first-generation college students with financial need or members of traditionally underrepresented groups for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. This was my path into academia. I chose to study African History, specifically to focus on 20th-century Kenyan history, because of my graduate school supervisor, who is also a Kenyanist. I had always been fascinated by Africa's decolonization and nation-building eras, so I knew I wanted to focus on this particular time period. The region (East Africa/Kenya) was purely because of my supervisor, who was (and is) a phenomenal scholar and mentor.

BA: What made you choose UC Merced/ a public university? What do you enjoy most about UC Merced?

MS: I chose to come to UC Merced and work in a public institution because of its diverse student body and its mission to serve all members of the community. I attended a public institution for my undergraduate studies, San Jose State, so I am acutely aware of the value these institutions offer to individuals striving for upward mobility. Additionally, before joining UC Merced, I taught at Mississippi State University, another public university with a socio-economically diverse population. I learned a great deal about myself while teaching at Mississippi State. Therefore, I knew I wanted to continue being in this kind of environment if I ever changed institutions. Finally, I believe in institutions that support and prioritize communities from underrepresented backgrounds, including those who are the first in their families to attend college. For these key reasons, UC Merced is my ideal campus. I truly appreciate and enjoy being surrounded by students who remind me a lot of the person I was as an undergraduate—driven, tenacious, family-oriented, and hardworking.

BA: For all the UCM students that are reading this issue, could you tell us about undergraduate courses that you teach? What can students expect from your courses and what do you want them to take away from lessons?

MS: Since I am a historian of modern Africa, I typically teach classes that focus on the colonial, decolonial, and nation-building eras. I enjoy teaching my decolonial Africa class, as well as the modern African history survey classes. In recent years, I have taught the History Program's Hist.100 course, known as the Historian's Craft, which is the theories and methods class for the majors. This class is also one of my favorites, as it reminds me of what we historians do and practice. It also allows me to learn about the latest research my colleagues are working on.

I am a social historian of 20th-century Africa, so my research and courses foreground the lived experiences of ordinary people. This means that students can expect to read secondary literature and primary sources that highlight the experiences of ordinary historical figures as much as possible. Additionally, students can anticipate using their critical thinking and analytical writing skills in my classes. They should also feel encouraged to provide their honest assessments of the course materials and readings. The main thing I want students to take away from my classes is that training in history is worthwhile because it equips them with the skills and insights to understand the world they come from and to envision the world they want to see created.

DB: We heard you are writing another book! What has that process looked like for you? What is the primary focus of your book, and did you face any challenges in narrowing down your topic?

MS: Indeed, I am currently completing my second book manuscript that focuses on Kenya's tea industry. Specifically, my project foregrounds the importance of Africa and Africans in the history of tea, global commodity studies, and contemporary histories of capitalism while

specifically highlighting the lived experiences of rural Kenyans who cultivated, pruned, picked, packaged, and sold tea leaves from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s. It argues that Kenya's dominance in the tea market was realized through the efforts of rural Africans who creatively negotiated their daily lives amidst the changes brought about by the spread of capitalism.

It has been a very long process since I started on this book project while wrapping up my first book. There have been times (maybe even years!) when I simply did not feel like working on the "tea book" because I lacked a clear focus. This was probably due to having too many archival sources and materials to work with, without a good research question to guide my inquiry. I also experience terrible writer's block; writing does not come easily to me. Therefore, it takes me a considerable amount of time to compose sentences, paragraphs, pages, and eventually a chapter. Accordingly, the writing process has been filled with lots of peaks and valleys. I am almost at the end of it now, thankfully!

Narrowing down my topic was not too challenging, as I wanted to focus on a specific industry and commodity. The issue is that within the tea industry, there are various sectors and, consequently, historical actors and processes that I must consider in my research and writing. This makes it difficult, as I only have limited space to work with in the manuscript. I am currently revising and polishing the chapters I have completed and finding that I need to either cut down significantly or add a little to them to ensure I adhere to my research question and thesis.

DB: As the chair of the History Program, how has your involvement on campus shaped your teaching or professional growth?

MS: My role as chair of the History Program has encouraged me to allocate time in my classes for students to network and build community among themselves. (This usually takes the form of group work.) I understood going into this role that community building was a top priority for the faculty and History students. Therefore, I, along with the History Program's intern, Dalila Barragan, and the Historical Society's student leadership, prioritized events and activities that encourage history students to come together in fellowship. I also believe this role has enabled me to become more attuned to what the students needed and wanted from their professors: namely, for the professor to not only teach their courses but to offer advice about what students can do with their history degrees in the 'real world,' especially in the current climate we find ourselves living in.

DB: Can you share one or two projects/opportunities you have had at UC Merced that you are most proud of and why they stand out to you?

MS: I am very proud to have been part of creating UC Merced's Center of Africana Studies. Along with my colleague, Dr. Sabriana Smith, I have served as one of the inaugural faculty co-

directors of the center for the past couple of years. I take great pride in the fact that Dr. Smith and I have organized and sponsored events that have brought together campus and community members to discuss, collaborate, research, and engage with the historical and contemporary experiences of Africans and people of African descent worldwide.

BA: What do you do to de-stress?

MS: The number one thing I do to help de-stress is run. I run a 5K at least a few times a week to manage my stress and maintain my health. Volunteering at my daughter's school, particularly during lunch recess, a couple of times a week, also helps me de-stress and, more importantly, provides perspective, as I am not only a scholar but also a mom who is watching time fly by way too fast.

BA: Thank you, Dr. Saeteurn, for participating in this interview! Your perspective and wise words are such a powerful contribution to not only the HCRES students but to the entire campus of UC Merced. As a student who got to experience your HIST 100 class in the Fall of 2024, I am so grateful and inspired by your teaching and your drive to share your knowledge of history and the impact your work has on the world. Dalila and I are both honored to have studied and learned under you.