Mansa Musa and Islam in Africa: Crash Course World History #16

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, my name's John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna talk about Africa.

Mr. Green Mr. Green! We've already talked about Africa. Egypt is in Africa, and you haven't shut up about it the entire course -

Yeah that's true, Me from the Past. But Africa's big - it's like, super big - much bigger than it appears on most maps, actually.

I mean, you can fit India and China, and the United States if you fold in Maine. All of that fits in Africa! Like any huge place, Africa is incredibly diverse, and it's a mistake to focus just on Egypt. So today let's go here, south of the Sahara desert.

[intro plays]

First, let's turn to the written records. Oh, right. We don't have very many, at least not written by Sub-Saharan Africans. Much of African history was preserved via oral rather than written tradition.

These days, we tend to think of writing as the most accurate and reliable form of description, but then again, we do live in a print-based culture. And we've already said that writing is one of the markers of civilization, implying that people who don't use writing aren't civilized, a prejudice that has been applied over and over again to Africa. But:

1. If you need any evidence that it's possible to produce amazing literary artifacts without the benefits of writing, let me direct your attention to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were composed and memorized by poets for centuries before anyone ever wrote them down. And,

2. No less an authority than Plato said that writing destroys human memory by alleviating the need to remember anything.

And 3. You think the oral tradition is uncivilized but here you are listening to me talk!

But we do have a lot of interesting records for some African histories, including the legendary tale of Mansa Musa. By legendary I mean some of it probably isn't true, but it sure is important. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So there was this king Mansa Musa, who ruled the west African empire of Mali, and in 1324-ish, he left his home and made the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

He brought with him an entourage of over 1000 people (some sources say 60,000) and, most importantly, 100 camel loads of gold. I wish it had been donkeys so I could say he had 100 assloads of gold, but no. Camels.

Right, so along the way Mansa Musa spent freely and gave away lots of his riches. Most famously, when he reached Alexandria, at the time one of the most cultured cities in the world, he spent so much gold that he caused runaway inflation throughout the city that took years to recover from.

He built houses in Cairo and in Mecca to house his attendants, and as he traveled through the world, a lot of people - notably the merchants of Venice - no, Thought Bubble, like actual merchants of Venice - right - they saw him in Alexandria and returned to Italy with tales of Mansa Musa's ridiculous wealth, which helped create the myth in the minds of Europeans that West Africa was a land of gold, an El Dorado. The kind of place you'd like to visit. And maybe, you know, in five centuries or so, begin to pillage. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So what's so important about the story of Mansa Musa? Well, first, it tells us there were African kingdoms, ruled by fabulously wealthy African kings. Which undermines one of the many stereotypes about Africa, that its people were poor and lived in tribes ruled by chiefs and witch doctors. Also, since Mansa Musa was making the hajj, we know that he was:

A. Muslim, and
B. relatively devout.

And this tells us that Africa, at least western Africa, was much more connected to the parts of the world we've been talking about than we generally are led to believe. Mansa Musa knew all about the places he was going before he got there, and after his visits, the rest of the Mediterranean world was sure interested in finding out more about his homeland.

Mansa Musa's pilgrimage also brings up a lot of questions about west Africa, namely, what did his kingdom look like and how did he come to convert to Islam? The first question is a little easier, so we'll start with that one.

The empire of Mali, which Mansa Musa ruled until the extremely elite year of 1337, was a large swath of West Africa, running from the coast hundreds of miles into the interior, and including many significant cities, the largest and best-known of which was Timbuktu.

The story of the Islamization of the Empire, however, is a bit more complicated. Okay, so pastoral North Africans called Berbers had long traded with West Africans, with the Berbers offering salt in exchange for West African gold. That may seem like a bad deal until you consider that without salt, we die, whereas without gold, we only have to face the universe's depraved indifference to us without the benefit of metallic adornment.

That went to an ominous place quickly.

Right, so anyway the Berbers were early converts to Islam, and Islam spread along those pre-existing trade routes between North and West Africa.

Right, so the first converts in Mali were traders, who benefited from having a religious as well as commercial connection to their trading partners in the North and the rest of the Mediterranean. And then the kings followed the traders, maybe because sharing the religion of more established kingdoms in the north and east would give them prestige, not to mention access to scholars and administrators who could help them cement their power.

So Islam became the religion of the elites in West Africa, which meant that the Muslim kings were trying to extend their power over largely non-Muslim populations which worshipped traditional African gods and spirits. In order not to seem too foreign, these African Muslim kings would often blend traditional religion with Islam - for instance, giving women more equality than was seen in Islam's birthplace.

Anyway, the first kings we have a record of adopting Islam were from Ghana, which was the first "empire" in western Africa. It really took off in the 11th century. As with all empires, and also everything else, Ghana rose and then fell, and it was replaced by Mali. The kings of Mali - especially Mansa Musa, but also Mansa Suleyman, his successor - tried to increase the knowledge and practice of Islam in their territory. So for example, when Mansa Musa returned from his hajj, he brought back scholars and architects to build mosques.

And the reason we know a lot about Mali is because it was visited

by Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan cleric and scholar who kind of had the best life ever. He was particularly fascinated by gender roles in the Malian empire - and by Malian women - writing, “They are extremely beautiful, and more important than the men.” Oh. It must be time for the open letter.

An Open Letter to Ibn Battuta: I wonder what’s in the Secret Compartment today. Oh. It appears to be some kind of fake beard... Movie magic! Stan, why did you do this to me?

Dear Ibn Battuta,

Bro, I love twitter and my x-box and Hawaiian pizza, but if I had to go into the past and live anyone’s life, it would be yours! Because you were this outlandishly learned scholar who managed to parlay your knowledge of Islam into the greatest road trip in history.

You went from Mali to Constantinople to India to Russia to Indonesia; you were probably the most well-traveled person before the invention of the steam engine. And everywhere you went, you were treated like a king and then you went home and wrote a really famous book called the *Rihla*, which people still read today and also, you could grow a real beard and I'M JEALOUS!

Best wishes, John Green

One more thing about Mansa Musa: There are lots of stories that Mansa Musa attempted to engage in maritime trade across the Atlantic Ocean, and some historians even believe that Malians reached the Americas. DNA investigation may one day prove it, but until then, we’ll only have oral tradition.

The Malian Empire eventually fell to Songhai, which was itself eventually overthrown for being insufficiently Islamic, all of which is to say that - like China or India or Europe - West Africa had its own empires that relied upon religion and war and incredibly boring dynastic politics. Man, I hate dynastic politics.

If I wanted to live in an ostensibly independent country that can’t let go of monarchy, I’d be like Thought Bubble and move to Canada. Oh, come on, Thought Bubble, that’s not fair. Shut up and take back Celine Dion!

All right, now let’s move to the other side of Africa where there was an alternative model of “civilizational” development. The eastern coast of Africa saw the rise of what historians called Swahili civilization, which was not an empire or a kingdom but a collection of city states - like Zanzibar and Mombasa and Mogadishu - all of which formed a network of trade ports. There was no central authority – each of these cities was autonomously ruled, usually, but not always, by a king. But there were three things that linked these city states such that we can consider them a common culture: language, trade and religion.

The Swahili language is part of a language group called Bantu, and its original speakers were from West Africa. Their migration to East Africa changed not only the linguistic traditions of Africa, but everything else, because they brought with them ironwork and agriculture. Until then, most of the people living in the East had been hunter-gatherers or herders, but once introduced, agriculture took hold, as it almost always does. Unless, wait for it, you’re the Mongols.

Modern day Swahili, by the way, is still a Bantu-based language, although it’s been heavily influenced by Arabic. On that topic, for a long time historians believed that the East African cities were all started by Arab or Persian traders, which was basically just racist - they didn’t believe that Africans were sophisticated enough to found these great cities. Now scholars recognize that all the major Swahili cities were founded well before Islam arrived in the region and that, in fact, trade had been going on since the first century CE.

But Swahili civilization didn’t begin its rapid development until the 8th century, when Arab traders arrived, seeking goods that they could trade in the vast Indian Ocean network, the Silk Road of the sea. And of course those merchants brought Islam with them, which, just like in West Africa, was adopted by the elites who wanted religious as well as commercial connections to the rest of the Mediterranean world.

In many of the Swahili states, these Muslim communities started out quite small, but at their height, between the 13th and 16th century, most of the cities boasted large mosques. The one in Kilwa even impressed Ibn Battuta, who of course visited the city, because he was having the best life ever.

Most of the goods exported were raw materials, like ivory and animal hides and timber - it’s worth noting, by the way, that when you’re moving trees around, you have a level of sophistication to your trade that goes way beyond the Silk Road. I mean, if you’ll recall they weren’t just trading, like, tortoise shells and stuff - not again!

Africans also exported slaves along the east coast, although not in HUGE numbers, and they exported gold, and they imported finished luxury goods like porcelain and books. In fact, archaeological digs in Kilwa have revealed that houses often featured a kind of built-in bookshelf.

Learning of books through architecture nicely captures the magic of studying history. Archaeology, writing, and oral tradition all intermingle to give us glimpses of the past. And each of those lenses may show us the past as if through some fun house mirror, but if we’re conscious about it, we can at least recognize the distortions.

Studying Africa reminds us that we need to look at lots of sources, and lots of kinds of sources if we want to get a fuller picture of the past. If we relied on only written sources, it would be far too easy to fall into the old trap of seeing Africa as backwards and uncivilized. Through approaching it with multiple lenses, we discover a complicated, diverse place that was sometimes rich and sometimes not - and when you look at it that way, it becomes not separate from, but part of, our history. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's Phrase Of The Week was "Animal crackers." If you want to suggest future phrases of the week or guess at this one, you can do so in comments; also, if you have questions about today's video, ask them, and our team of historians will endeavor to answer them.

Thanks for watching and supporting Crash Course. And as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.