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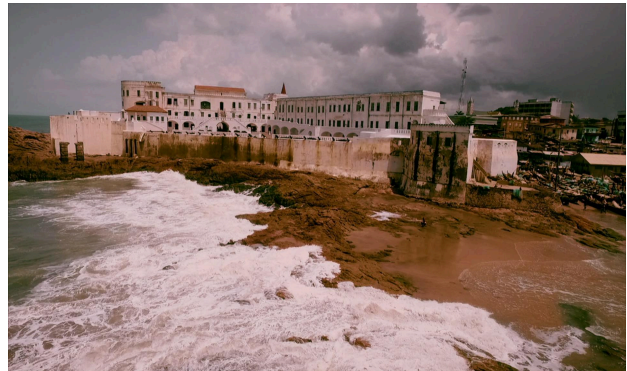
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World History

Reading 4.7

Africa's Great Civilizations, **Episode #5 "The Atlantic Age"**

The series' fifth hour examines the tremendous changes wrought in Africa by the opening of the Atlantic World between the 15th and 18th centuries. For centuries, Eastern Africa, West Africa and Northern Africa had all been tied deeply into long-distance commercial networks linking across



the Eastern Hemisphere. However, the encounter between West African kingdoms and, first, Portuguese mariners travelling farther and farther south along Africa's Atlantic coast, and then the European colonization of the New World, transformed those relations. Across the continent kingdoms and empires would rise and fall, with some 12.5 million Africans suffering enslavement in the crosshairs.

Host Henry Louis Gates, Jr. begins the story in northern Angola, where the mountain city of Mbanza Kongo was once the capital of the great African kingdom of Kongo. By the beginning of the 17th century European observers listed Kongo among the world's great kingdoms - a tale of increasing religious and economic entanglement with Europe that Gates recounts in the kingdom's ancient ruins. In 1483, Kongo's King Nzinga Nkuwu forges a potent trade relationship with Portuguese explorer Diogo Cao and, triggered by this first encounter, King Nzinga Nkuwu switches the kingdom's official religion to Roman Catholicism in 1491 A.D. It is King Afonso, his son, who then reorders Kongo society based on a distinctly indigenous form of Christianity, which Gates reveals by examining the kingdom's art and visiting one of the most important architectural remains in the history of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Cathedral of São Salvador. These weren't the only changes binding Kongo to Europe. King Afonso makes the fateful decision to sell slaves Kongo had captured, as enemies or captives in war, to the Portuguese for their burgeoning sugar production on the island of São Tomé and Príncipe. This was an established trade in Kongo that Afonso tried to, but could not control once opened to the Portuguese, especially after they and other European powers expand their reach to the New World.

The Portuguese would have a far more difficult time with the Kingdom of Ndongo, today part of Angola, where they established a slave port at Luanda. Gates explains how war between the Portuguese and Ndongo broke out in 1579 A.D., lasting nearly a century, and how amid the chaos a vast quantity of slaves were sent to fire up the Brazilian sugar industry. From this conflict emerges one of the most charismatic and enduring characters in all African history, the warrior queen Njinga. In fighting the Portuguese, Njinga would rule over two kingdoms, Ndongo and Matamba, convert to Christianity, and engage in a shifting alliance with Kongo and the Dutch to try to expel the Portuguese from her territories. Though Njinga would outlast 10 Portuguese governors before her death at 81, Gates shows how the combination of avarice, aggression, and warfare between these various powers made the region that is today Angola the single largest source of slaves in the history of the trans-Atlantic trade.

Moving through time to the 18th century, when the slave trade reaches a fever pitch, Gates next introduces the port of Ouidah (in today's Benin), once the busiest slave market in West Africa and the principal commercial centre of the kingdom of Dahomey. While the kingdom of Benin held back from fully participating in the trading of human beings, the kingdom of Dahomey represented the other extreme, a state that built much of its wealth around the slave trade. But Dahomey was also a state with a rich

culture, that valued palace architecture, the arts and Vodun, whose religious practices would be transported across the Atlantic by enslaved Africans and transformed into voodoo.

Gates observes how the transatlantic slave trade ultimately robbed the continent of its most valuable resource: its people, especially its young adult male population. This does not mean there was a lack of resistance, as witnessed in Ganvié on Lake Nokoué in Benin, where the Tofinu people used the swampy land around their lagoons' shores as a natural defence at a time when wars engulfed the region.

In the West African interior, the 17th and 18th centuries mark a time of revolutionary movements aimed at reforming society and governance. These movements for reform culminate in the advent of the Sokoto Caliphate at the dawn of the 19th century, after the young Muslim cleric, Usman dan Fodio of Hausaland, wages war against the kingdom of Gobir to resist the enslavement of Muslims. The Sokoto Caliphate, Gates explains, arises as one of the most powerful empires in Africa, inspiring the use of African languages in scholarly production. Yet, Gates reflects on a great irony of Sokoto's history—that its armies, too, in spite of the revolutionary spirit of its founder, ended up enslaving millions of non-Muslims.

Viewing Notes for Episode #5 “The Atlantic Age”

Instructions: For each heading, write down notes about information you believe is important and will support your answer to our Q4 question “What were the civilizations of Africa like during Era 2?” **Be sure to write down something—you will thank yourself later.**

Kongo (including Sao Tome and Principe)

Ndongo

Dahomey (including Ouidah)

Ways to Resist the Slave Trade & Impact of Slave Trade on Africa

Sokoto Caliphate

