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2023

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Recommended Citation

Spruiell, Garrett, "African Presence in the Ancient New World" (2023). *IdeaFest 2023*. 132.
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African Presence in the Ancient New World

Garrett Spruiell – Cal Poly Humboldt

Abstract

Growing up in America we were taught that Columbus discovered the New World in 1492, years later we were then retaught that the Vikings landed in the America's long before the Europeans. Is it not then possible to speculate from increasing evidence that Africans could have journeyed across the Atlantic hundreds of years before Columbus? For years this subject has been discussed within America's scholarly realm, years filled with chastisement, degradation, and doubt. It wasn't the first time an attempt to investigate Black history was denigrated and it won't be the last either. Within this research project, I'll be presenting on a controversial topic that many today deem as unchallengeable due to the influence from the history books the colonizers of our country wrote to indoctrinate us with. From this investigation, I intend to analyze conflicting theories so as to narrow down the plausibility of pre-Columbian transoceanic travel between Africa and the America's. To do this, I'll analyze peer-reviewed articles, utilize the extended knowledge of experts in Africana Studies, and present relevant research and data collected by Muslim Scholars. As my research progresses I expect to find contrasting opinions regarding the validity of this claim, as the contentiousness surrounding this subject is high here in America. Regardless, my aim is to elevate African voices and perspectives, to show the public the possibility of alternative truths, as well as spread a sense of skepticism towards our western history books.

Data

As I mentioned earlier, the Moors of Spain were much more technologically advanced than many other 8th Century civilizations, they were pioneers of cartography, science, mathematics, geography, and so much more. The idea that Islamic Africans didn't make boats or possessed the ability to traverse long distances across the ocean is blatantly false as their ancestors had introduced the use of the lateen sail and the Astrolab, a device that can show the position of the stars as well as make astronomical measurements. They were descendants of people who had been voyaging for years from the port of Aden in Yemen to Colombo in Sri Lanka; a distance almost fifty percent greater than the one between Natal Brazil, and Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. Other evidence that supports this claim is the 4th Century Roman coins discovered south of the Caribbean. Additionally, two Arabic coins from the 8th century were also discovered. Historian Abdullah Hakim Quick postulates that these coins showed up as a consequence of Moorish travelers crossing the Atlantic sometime around 800 CE; he furthered the credibility of these claims by utilizing Piri Muhyi'd-Din Reis' map, created in 1513. The map contained considerable information that would've been unknown to Columbus, info such as accurate measures of longitude across Africa, the Atlantic, the Cape Verde Islands, and others as well. Not only this, but the Andes Mountains, the Amazon River, and the island of Marajo all of which had not been discovered by Europe yet were all displayed on the map. Furthermore, we have evidence from Historical Tribal collections in Florida that the name "Marracou", a word that derives from the Islamic region Morocco, was utilized not only as a name for a location in Florida but it was also the name of an Indigenous Tribal Leader. (Florida, 1996)(French, 2016) Lastly, one example Author Zina Zerara presents towards this topic is that during the rule of Abdul-Rahman III, it's documented that African Muslims sailed into the "ocean of darkness and fog" (the Atlantic) from the port of Debla (Palos) situated in Spain. It's noted that after their journey they returned with treasures from a "strange and curious island". In an interview with Harvard graduate Jerald Dirks, he notes that there were plenty of Muslim voyages to the New World long before Columbus, the earliest being Khashkhash ibn Saeed ibn Aswad's journey who departed from Spain in 889 CE. Additionally, Muslim historian Abu Bakr Ibn Umar Al-Gutiyya noted the voyage of Ibn Farrukh, who sailed from Kadesh in 999 CE to the Great Canary Islands and made contact with King Guanariga. (Zerara:2017)

Discussion

With all of this evidence plus much more I couldn't even touch on, it's appropriate to put forth the claim that African Muslims were capable of trans-oceanic travel long before Europeans were. However, it's clear that our scholarly realm hasn't conducted enough research to put forth an established theory as to exactly when individuals from Africa initially arrived in the New World. One issue that hinders any progress is the Eurocentric hegemony that has influenced the Western scholarly realm for years, significantly influencing the way Western scholars approach this field of inquiry. Another is that much of the historical knowledge held by people across Africa and Arabia has been continuously disparaged by a majority of the scholarly realm. My hope is that from this presentation, you've not only gained a better understanding of African history but also begun to question the history that European colonizers have created to influence our knowledge of the past.

Introduction

Since the dawn of colonization, history has prioritized the achievements of white Europeans whilst belittling the accomplishments of others, as it was white elitists who wrote the history books. But before all this, North African Muslims better known as the Moors took control of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 AD and introduced their vast knowledge of science, mathematics, geography, and philosophy to the rest of Europe. The Moors were more evolved in every way, they lived in lavish palaces while European Christians resided in barns without chimneys or windows. Ruling for 800 years, the Moors paved roads, had raised sidewalks, and even installed miles of lamps to illuminate their streets, mind you this was done hundreds of years before a paved street or lamp was installed in Paris or London. Having built seventeen universities and more than seventy public libraries during their reign, education was accessible to all, not to mention that at the same point in time, 99% of Christian Europe was illiterate only having two universities at their disposal. Being as technologically advanced as they were, is it not blatantly ignorant if not racist to assert that Africans couldn't have had the ability to traverse across the Atlantic to the New World before Columbus?



Piri Muhyi'd-Din Reis 1513 Map

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