



CHECKING IN FROM ALL CORNERS

Polynesia, Africa and the Americas – 400 > 1500

Disconnected

By the year 1500, all the continents of the world were populated by humans. But by that year all the continents were definitely not connected. Sure, there was the Silk Road criss-crossing Asia. There was the Indian Ocean trade network linking East Africa to East Asia. There was even a Trans-Saharan caravan trail connecting the gold-producing regions of West Africa to the Middle East. But still, about 75% of the planet sat isolated from the other continents. The indigenous peoples of the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa and Australoasia might have interacted with their neighboring tribes, but they definitely didn't meet up with travelers from across the oceans. They might not have seen themselves as isolated (living sometimes in cities far larger than the towns of Medieval Europe), but by today's standards, they were on their own.

We don't know a ton about these early inhabitants of the "new worlds," not because they didn't have vibrant, complex, advanced civilizations, but because they failed to do one thing that makes history possible. They didn't write. Yes, they drew pictures on their monuments and carved monoliths to illustrate their daily lives or to honor their gods, but that just doesn't count. So unfortunately, our knowledge of their early years is fairly negligible compared to the mountains of records we have of the Mediterranean and Asian civilizations of the ancient world. Archaeologists have uncovered a ton of evidence (especially of the major civilizations of Mesoamerica – today's Latin America), but still most of our accounts of their worlds come not from actual members of the civilization, but from the explorers that would run into them over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries.

But let's try to go back a few hundred years and try to make sense of what was going on in their worlds prior to the Age of Exploration that once and for all linked the world together.

North America

Over in the Americas, there was no one civilization that dominated the entire continent. There was no singular group of Indians all following the same leader and glorifying the same gods. By the time Columbus arrived in 1492, thousands of groups of Native Americans had already set up shop around the Western Hemisphere. Some were small groups that stayed hunter-gatherers. Others created efficient empires that boasted highly "civilized" methods of agriculture, government and human interaction.

How many tribes do you think existed on the North American continent? Take a guess. Four? Twenty? 260 million? Well, not quite 260 million, but here are just a few:

Key Questions

- In 1300, to what extent were the Mesoamerican peoples more civilized than Europeans?
- What factors led to the ability/inability of African civilizations to remain "golden" for centuries?
- What elements of Polynesian life can still be seen today?

Abnaki Alabama Aleuts Algonquin Anasazi Apache Arapaho Arawak Arikara Assiniboin Aztec Beothuk Cabazon Caddo Catawba Cherokee Cheyenne Chickasaw Chinook Chippewa Choctaw Chumash Comanche Cree Creek Crow Delaware Erie Eskimo Flathead Haida Hidatsa Hohokam Hopi Hupa Huron Ioway Innu Inuit Iroquois Kaw Kickapoo Kiowa Klamath Kootenai Kwakiutl Mahican Makah Maliseet Mandan Mayan Melungeon Menominee Metis Mississauga Modoc Mohave Mohawk Mohegan Montagnais Mound Builders Narragansett Navajo Nez Perce Nootka Olmec Osage Ottawa Oto Papago Passamaquoddy Pawnee Pennacook Penobscot Peoria Pequot Pima Ponca Potawatomi Pueblo Quana Parker Quapaw Sauk Seminole Seneca Shawnee Shoshone Shuswap Sioux Squanto Tlingit Toltec Tonkawa Ute Washo Wampanoag Wichita Winnebago Wovoka Wyandotte Yakima Yuchi Yurok Zapotec Zuni

As you can see, there was no one Native American nation, religion, language or government. Not only were they not unified, but many of these tribes had conflicts with each other that the Europeans would later exploit to their advantage.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Mesoamerica

To the south it was a bit different. In the southern area of what we today call Mexico and along the western coast of South America, two civilizations flourished at a scale only matched by the Romans, the Mongols, the Muslims, the Indians and the Chinese. These two civilizations were the Aztecs (the Mexicas) of Mexico and the Incas of modern day Chile. Together these two regions made up what was later called Mesoamerica – or “middle America.”

Mayans

The Aztec civilization had built on the foundations established by first the Mayans and then the Toltecs. Most people hadn't heard of the Mayans until 2012 when some of the cognitively-challenged members of our species started pointing to this civilization's calendar as a clue that the end of the world was coming at the end of the year. Even though Hollywood made a film that proved otherwise (cleverly-named 2012), the year came and went, and yet another doomsday prophecy fell into the ignored graveyard of man's end time's predictions. But before the Mayans were inspiration for Hollywood fodder, they were a dynamic society that built stone temples and an acropolis, invented floating gardens that resisted frost and could be farmed year round, developed a system of math that included place value and the number zero and organized a capital city at Teotihuacan that by 700 AD was the most-populated city on the planet. It was first established around 2000 BC, at the time of the great Egyptian empires, and continued uninterrupted until the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century.

However, before the Spanish arrived, the Mayans were challenged and eventually overpowered by first the Toltecs around the year 1000, but ultimately by the Aztecs in the 14th century. Like the Mediterranean powers of Persia then Greece then Rome, all the three major powers – Mayan, Toltec, Aztec – continued to exist even when one of the other tribes proved superior.

Aztecs

The reign of the Aztecs was brutal and complex, but on a scale far surpassing their predecessors. The Mayans might have built the Great Plaza at Tikal and their capital city of Teotihuacan might have housed 200,000 people, but the Aztecs did them one better. They built a capital city in the middle of a lake, Lake Texcoco, and then surrounded this island city with floating gardens and two causeway land bridges that connected the capital to the 500,000 surrounding villagers lining the lake's shores. This capital city, Tenochtitlan, was one of the most advanced and disturbing cities of human existence.

It housed astronomers and mathematicians that plotted the stars more accurately than many of the famed skygazers of Europe's Scientific Revolution. The Aztecs required every one of their kids to go to school,

regardless of gender (the Western world wouldn't require universal compulsory education until the 19th century). They developed law codes covering every offense from theft to adultery to public drunkenness, with punishments ranging from a public head shaving to having your heart ripped out in public. They had divorce courts that awarded half of all a husband's assets to his wife. Aztec markets offered everything from human slaves, to falcons and partridges (with or without the pear tree), to medicines made of crushed black beetles, to obsidian and jade necklaces, to jaguar hides to be worn by elite warriors. The Aztecs invented a ball game that was a little bit soccer and a little bit basketball, where players used only their hips to bump a ten-pound solid rubber ball into a cement hoop ten feet off the ground (imagine what those hip welts looked like). They mastered the art of agriculture, assigning men each day to collect human feces to fertilize their thousands of individual chinampas (floating farmlands) that grew corn and squash.

Stars and schools and divorce and birds and ball games and farming are all truly fascinating, but let's be serious. When people think of the Aztecs, they think of one thing. These guys liked to kill people. They believed their gods must be ceaselessly appeased with blood sacrifices, so they obliged by running a constant stream of victims to the roof of their temples, where the high priests would thrust obsidian daggers into their chests, and then rip out their still beating hearts to show to the onlookers below. The bodies were then heaped down the side of the temple, creating a mound of corpses fifty feet high. In one four-day festival, 80,000 lives were taken to hopefully ensure a bountiful harvest.

And where did all these victims come from? Some actually volunteered for the honor, but most were captured from villages across Mesoamerica. An entire industry of hunting humans for sacrifice emerged, making the Aztecs none too popular in the region. If ever a high-level village elder or warrior was taken, his captor would earn the distinction of getting to wear his captive's peeled-off skin around town for a month, after his family chopped up his carcass and dined on his flesh. The Aztecs were annoying because they kept eating people, so by the time the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, the neighboring tribes needed little convincing to align with the European invaders to topple their carnivorous Aztec oppressors. But for two centuries, it reigned over a golden age that rivaled anything the Eurasians had produced to that point.

Inca

To the south of Mexico and the Aztec kingdom sat the equally impressive Inca Empire that stretched down the western coast of South America, covering the countries today called Bolivia, Chile and Peru. Unlike the Aztecs who lived around the lakes of central Mexico, the Incas survived in the high mountains of the Andes. They created an empire in the heavens, building 25,000 miles of trails, carving out terraced mountain farms for their corn, potatoes and tomatoes and erecting a summer estate for their king 8000 feet above sea level (one of today's new Seven Wonders of the World – Machu Pichu). Like the Aztecs to the north, the Incas controlled their empire without iron tools, without horses and without wheels. Their largest pack animal was the llama and their largest protein source was the guinea pig. They survived and thrived through man's labor. Their messengers ran the Inca trails, their farmers used their bare hands to plow the fields and their soldiers fought threats to the throne with clubs and slingshots.

Everyone Else

In the rest of the Americas, no other empire challenged those of the Aztecs and the Incas. Most of the 90 million inhabitants from the Arctic to the tip of South America survived independently, as hunter-gatherers, as farmers and as traders of natural resources. They recorded little of their successes in writing, but their tombs, their stone temples and the stories told by the later European invaders speak to the cohesion, the triumphs and the trials of the American tribes.

In summary: Across the Atlantic, the Americas were evolving sporadically, with some clans continuing to wander the plains using the tools of hunter-gatherers 100,000 years ago, while others developed into kingdoms wealthier than any realm in Europe or the Far East.

Africa

Africa's a hard region to introduce. No singular empire dominated the continent. No singular religion unified all its people. No writing, economic or social system emerged to unify vast stretches of the continent. It was just not possible. Africa is just too huge to ever unite. When you picture Africa, you have to ignore the Mercator map projection you grew up with. In that world map (the one with Europe dead set in the middle), Africa is big, but it really only looks about twice the size of Europe, just a bit bigger than South America. But this map is a joke, skewed both to fit all the continents on one page, but also to reinforce the Eurocentric perception of the world in the 16th century. The real Africa is larger than the United States, India, China, Mexico, Japan and Western Europe COMBINED (check out the Peters Projection Map). There was no way any one civilization could ever have dominated this entire continent. Rome couldn't have done it. The Mongols couldn't have done it. The Muslims tried, but they couldn't have done it. No central empire could have ever connected the impassable deserts, the deadly swamps, the impenetrable forests and the vast plains filled with an ark full of hungry carnivores.

Oral Tradition

Organizing the continent was made even more difficult because the Africans weren't exactly prolific writers. Except for a few kingdoms on the coasts or the Muslim-controlled lands up north, Africans weren't the most impressive historians. They preferred to entrust their tribe's stories to a village elder, walking libraries who passed down all their people's knowledge from one generation to the next. They also really didn't need writing. First, much of their land was shared by the whole clan, and you'd be surprised how little you need laws when there aren't property issues. But also, remember that written language first developed as a way of recording business transactions or cataloguing detailed laws when societies grew so large that you couldn't trust your neighbor anymore. This population tipping point was rarely reached in Africa, so local clans just stuck to the decisions of their village chieftains or trusted the words and deeds of each other because you knew if you screwed over someone in the tribe, there was a pretty good chance you'd be expelled, forced to survive out on your own in an unfriendly wasteland or just killed.

Agriculture

Civilizations also didn't develop on a large scale because they lacked massive agricultural projects. It was hard to farm tons of acres because the continent lacked huge domesticable animals (it's a bit tough to hook up a rhino or a hippo to a plow and ask it to politely till the soil), so they could only farm as much as their human labor would allow. This meant farming remained relatively small-scale and rarely allowed for the food surplus needed to launch an evolution of civilization.

Trade & Civilizations

The great civilizations had one thing in common – they were traders. This didn't mean that Africa didn't have its great civilizations. It just meant that their golden civilizations remained restricted to one region and their reign was relatively short-lived. They would tap into a resource demanded by their neighbors or the Eurasians, they would mine that resource until it ran out and they would set up markets and trade routes inviting would-be travellers to take their commodities to far away lands. The most-coveted resource varied from generation to generation. It might be gold or slaves or salt or timber or rubber or sugar or coffee. Today it's oil. Regardless the type of good, these resources almost always were more of a curse than a blessing, for they brought only temporary wealth to a region and unfailingly crippled the economic development of the African peoples. What incentive was there to learn how to manufacture goods when you could just dig a hole in the ground and find instant wealth?

West Africa

And it was this instant wealth that brought a few African empires to the attention of the world's markets. Foremost among the great African empires was the Kingdom of Mali in northwestern Africa, home to two-thirds of the gold reserves on the planet. In most parts of the world, you can only get gold by digging deep into the earth's crust, but in Mali the gold lined the beds of the Niger River. The kings of Mali used this wealth

to enrich their own pockets, but also to build universities and huge trading centers in towns like the famous Timbuktu. Salt trading nomads from central Africa brought in hundred-pound blocks of salt to Timbuktu, bringing the gold they picked up back across the Sahara to the trading ports of the Mediterranean Sea. In the 14th century, one man, King Mansa Musa decided to take his pilgrimage to Mecca, a fairly common practice for ordinary Muslims, but this man was no ordinary Muslim. He was the richest man in the history of the world (he was seven times richer than Bill Gates is today), acquiring over \$400 billion in profits made off his gold and salt empire. Along his way to Mecca, Mansa Musa stopped off in Cairo with his caravan of one wife, five hundred concubines, five hundred slaves and sixty thousand porters. As he walked through the streets of Cairo, the locals were blown away by his entourage – even the slaves all carried golden staffs. Mansa Musa had no problem rubbing these foreigners' noses in his wealth, tossing bags of gold around town, totally destroying the Egyptian economy. From this moment on, Timbuktu was labeled the Golden City of Africa and, over the centuries, the myths of a city lined with gold kept enticing Europeans to make their way into the heart of the continent, looking for Africa's own El Dorado.

But lost in the myths of Timbuktu's astounding (yet temporary) golden wealth was the fact that the Mali kings had established the most advanced libraries of the 14th century. 25,000 students attended the universities of Timbuktu, ingesting the knowledge from the 300,000 scrolls lining the walls of the academies. Everything the Greeks, the Muslims, the Indians and the Chinese had ever conceived could be found in Timbuktu.

But alas, this part of Africa faded into history like every other city of the world that survived solely on its prestige as a market on a major trading route. For once the gold dried up and the salt stopped coming in from the desert, men stopped making their way across the Sahara. Timbuktu died a slow death and when the Europeans finally found the famed city in the 19th century, it was a mere shadow of its former grandeur.

East Africa

This precarious position as a regional trading giant was also shared by the kingdoms of Africa's east – the Swahili Coast. Connected to the Indian Ocean trade network for over a thousand years, dozens of east African port towns gained wealth and prestige by processing the goods from the interior of Africa and loading them onto the Arab trading vessels for their passage to India and the Orient. Because the Muslims dominated this trade from the 10th century forward, many of these kingdoms developed a multicultural flair – creating faiths, art and economic and political systems that were a hybrid of African customs and Arab tradition. Locals adopted Islam, and the area's architecture (with aqueducts, arches and intricate geometric carvings) looked more like a city in the Middle East than one from the African interior. Rulers grew rich off import and export taxes and most were content simply watching their city-state prosper. They rarely competed with each other, instead focusing on being trusted hosts, guaranteeing the safety of traveller's goods and the comfort of their guests. The greatest of the Swahili city-states was Kilwa, that by the 15th century controlled dozens of coastal and mainland cities, like Zanzibar, Mozambique and Madagascar.

However, when the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century, the city-states of the Swahili Coast crumbled before the supremacy of European gunpowder, immediately handing over their wealth and their trading empires to the sea invaders.

Zimbabwe

Another of the great African empires to rise and fall with the riches of resource extraction was the Kingdom of Zimbabwe, a landlocked region in southern Africa that prospered by sending gold and copper to the Swahili Coast. Unlike the other empires of Africa, the Zimbabwe people erected huge stone cities, similar to the ones found in the great civilizations of the Americas and Eurasia. Zimbabwe actually means "house built of stone" and every one of the 18,000 residents had their own stone home. Though most of these smaller stone abodes have vanished over the last five hundred years, a giant walled King's Court with its five-meter thick walls (looking remarkably like the castle walls of Europe) can still be visited should you ever find yourself walking around southern Africa. But like its trading partners to the east, once the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century, the age of Great Zimbabwe came to an immediate end, as the Europeans would establish

themselves as the sole benefactors of the African resource trade. And since that day, Africa has struggled to escape the grasp of outsiders entering its land to siphon off the gifts of nature their continent holds beneath the soil's surface.

Polynesian

Migration

One region that remained relatively free of European touch was the network of Polynesian islands dotting the Pacific Ocean. Few historians ever discuss the impact of the Polynesians, but their reach was nothing less than remarkable. Using nothing more than wooden canoes and their knowledge of the stars, the Polynesian peoples spent three thousand years colonizing the islands of the great Pacific Ocean, a body of water that covers nearly 1/3 the earth's surface. Historians trace these first ocean sailors to the island of Taiwan off the coast of China. Today, Taiwan is peopled 98% by Chinese from the mainland, but that remaining 2% are the descendants of the first Polynesian explorers. Sometime around 1000 BC, about the time of the Trojan War over in Greece, a Polynesian clan set off in canoes, looking for independence from their fatherland. They then settled nearby islands, showing that colonization was possible. Generation after generation set off further south and further east, looking for new lands to settle. The Polynesians never really developed agriculture, instead choosing to hunt, gather and fish. When a new island's resources couldn't keep up with their needs, an adventurous clan would hop back in one of their wooden canoes and head out again on the high seas. They replicated this process of exploring, colonizing, exploring, colonizing over the next 1500 years, ultimately making it all the way to Easter Island, nearly ten thousand miles away from Taiwan. Through the course of these voyages of discovery, the Polynesians settled over one thousand islands, spreading their culture all the way to the tip of New Zealand (and some even believe to the shores of South America).

Each settlement demonstrated the recognizable traits of the Polynesians. Whether in Hawaii or New Zealand or Samoa or Fiji or Micronesia or the Auckland Islands, the settlers all mastered the science of navigation and engineered out-rigger canoes that could criss-cross the ocean, trading with nearby island communities or fishing in the open seas. They usually lived in small family units, with four or five communal houses clustered around a garden. Because resources on these islands (often volcanic atolls) were scarce, to survive they had to share. If you didn't share, you'd die. Because of this environmental reality, private property was rare, so similar to many African clan-based societies, formal laws and a written language were a waste of time.

Literacy?

But that isn't to say the Polynesians didn't like to write, they just so happened to like to write on themselves. The last couple decades have seen the whole tattoo craze spread beyond the biker gangs of the west coast, to becoming so mainstream that everyone from frat boys to teenage girls with individuality issues are getting "inked." You can blame the Polynesians for starting this trend thousands of years ago. They'd use a carved bone needle to jab ink from a candlenut under the skin. But unlike today where people choose to scar themselves with stars or crosses or angels or dragons or some clever little saying from Buddha, back on the Polynesian islands, tattoos represented your class in society or how many sexual partners you'd had.

Before you lost your virginity and got one more tattoo mark, your village had to plump up. In a practice known as fattening, Polynesian adolescents were removed from the village and force-fed for months, if not years, to hopefully add on a few more pounds of flesh to make them more sexually attractive. There's also a bit of Darwin at play as the chunkier Polynesians had a better chance of surviving the long voyages from island to island. So, if you've ever wondered why wrestling's "The Rock" or the New Zealand's rugby "All Blacks" are so huge, you can look back to the realities of their ancestor's dating practices (or maybe it's because they work out a ton and eat some very effective protein shakes).

Culture

Polynesian culture isn't best known for its tattooing and fattening. Today when most people think of the island peoples, they think of surfing or hula dancing or people who just seem to smile incessantly. And of course

there are those stone-headed statues on Easter Island – the moai. With their distinctive design where their heads are about the same size as their bodies, the moais could weigh up to eighty tons and be as tall as a three story building. Carved out of stone blocks, and then dragged on log rollers to the coastal perches, nearly 900 were crafted in the 13th and 14th centuries. Tragically, the Easter Island settlers cut down every single tree on their island to construct and move the statues, causing their ultimate extinction.

Conclusion

By the 15th century, across the globe, man had stretched out to every habitable chunk of land, living in clans or cities or even in complex empires. Today, the cultures and the contributions of the Americas, Africa and Polynesia continue to pop up in our daily lives, but for their stories to be told, they would first had to be found and linked by a people unwilling to let others live in isolation. These people, these Europeans, would in the 1400s begin the two century long challenge of uniting the entire globe, partly for selfish reasons, but also simply for the sake of satisfying man's passion for discovery – a passion that still exists to this day.

But before the Europeans could even consider exploring the world, they first had to get their act together and escape their Dark Ages. They'd need a few revolutions to get that ball rolling.

But that is for another chapter.