THE MUDFISH AND THE EUROPEAN: AN AFRICAN RECORD OF THE AGE OF DISCOVERY

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The Voyages of Discovery opened vast new worlds for European exploration, including the mysterious Dark Continent. The Portuguese left ample written records of their "discovery" of Africa, which have dominated the historian's approach to the Age of Discovery. However, many African cultures were not literate and, consequently, the African perspective on the European explorations is often largely lost in introductory surveys.[1]

Although European records provide much valuable insight into African history, they are embodiments of *European* perception and *European* experiences. There is, however, another portrait of the Age of Discovery that Africans created for the benefit of Africans, and that provides a more complete view of the interaction of Europe and Africa in the early modern period. The arrival of the Portuguese in 1486 in Benin, a kingdom on the West coast of Africa near modern

Figure 1. The location of modern Benin on the West coast of Africa. Benin reached its height in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when it occupied territories of the Yoruba and Igbo to the west and northwest, northeast to the Ishan area, and east to the Niger River.

[1]Thomas Hodgkin has argued forcefully that there was, in a very far-reaching sense, an "African discovery of Europe": "For present purposes, we must reject the Europe-centered approach implied in talking about the discovery of West Africa … From the African standpoint, it was not the Portuguese who first 'discovered' Benin, but Benin which first discovered the Portuguese." See his *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 32. My approach is a bit more restricted, implying only that there is a profound sense in which Africans encountered European models, imagery, and ideology and integrated them to varying degrees with African traditions.

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Nigeria, prompted a renaissance in art.[2] Images of the Portuguese are abundant in the art of Benin, and contributed to the myths of Benin's national origin and the divine presence of the Oba.[3]

This early African record lived on in myth and art long after the Portuguese left Benin, providing a rich resource that introduces indigenous African culture and lays a strong foundation for a critical analysis of the success and/or failure of the Europeans in Africa. The following lesson should be presented after an introductory lecture on The Voyages of Discovery, and works well as a lecture/discussion in a fifty-minute class session. It is most effective when supplemented by research projects and collaborative learning exercises.

The Portuguese Arrival in Benin

The strength of the Kingdom of Benin was a natural attraction for the Portuguese as they colonized the coastal regions of Africa. When the Portuguese arrived in Benin in the fifteenth century, they developed a mutually advantageous relationship with the Oba that capitalized on an already well established national mythology. In many parts of Africa, Africans identified the Portuguese with the gods of the sea since the Europeans arrived by boat. The Christian practice of baptizing initiates often further strengthened their association with water. In some areas of Africa, natives literally translated the term for

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[2]Primary sources suggest various possibilities for the date of the Portuguese arrival in Benin. Antonio Galvão's *Tratado dos descombrimentos* (Porto, 1944) claims that Ruy de Sequeira first reached Benin in 1472, while Chief Egharevba's record of the oral tradition of Benin, found in *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan, 1960), states only that de Sequeira reached the general vicinity of Benin. Ruy de Pina's *Chronica del Rey Dom Joao II*, trans. J.W. Blake, in *Europeans in West Africa* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1942), and João de Barros's *Da Asia*, trans. G.R. Crone, in *Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937, 124-125), and in Hodgkin, 112-113, assert that João Affonso d'Aveiro's journey to the court of Benin in 1486 was the first visit of the Portuguese to Benin.

For general background on the Portuguese in West Africa, see Eric Axelson, *Congo to Cape: Early Portuguese Explorers* (London, 1973), James Duffy, *Portuguese Africa* (London, 1949), J.W. Blake, *Europeans in West Africa 1450-1560* (Hakluyt Society, 1942), E.G. Ravenstein, *The Voyages of Cão and Bartholomew Dias 1482-88*, in *Geographical Journal* (London, 1900), and A.F.C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897* (Longmans, 1969). For primary source material on the Portuguese in West Africa, see J.W. Blake, *Europeans in West Africa: Documents to Investigate the Nature and Scope of Portuguese Involvement in Africa*; Basil Davidson, ed., *The African Past: Chronicles from Antiquity to Modern Times* (rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1966), and Thomas Hodgkin, ed., *Nigerian Perspectives*.

[3]The Oba, or ruler, was considered to be divine. According to oral tradition the first Oba came from Ife, in the east, where the world itself originated. The geographical location of Ife to the northwest of Benin raises questions about the reliability of oral tradition.

Only the Oba could confer titles and display the ceremonial symbols of power. He had the power of life and death over his subjects and, for this reason, the Oba was identified with Olokun, the source of all life and the god of the sea. He was the channel through which the spiritual world permeated the physical world, and was often symbolized by the mudfish, a creature that was able to live on land for lengthy periods and could deliver a strong electric charge. The Oba could not be seen eating in public nor could he appear ill. Unlike mortal men, inhabitants believed that the Oba did not need to sleep.

white man (muzungu) as "sea monster." Since the white men went below the decks of their ships to bring up treasures to trade, many Africans assumed that they were opening passages into the depths of the ocean.

Similarly, inhabitants of Benin identified the Portuguese with the sea god, from whom legend held that their Oba drew his power. The Portuguese traded brass and copper manillas, cowrie shells, coral and glass beads, and other items in exchange for slaves, pepper, ivory, stone beads, and African cloth, which they ultimately exchanged for gold on the Gold Coast. The Portuguese brought great wealth to Benin, which the natives interpreted as a gift from the god of the sea to the Oba. Although Portuguese manillas (brass and copper rings) were used as a form of currency in Benin from the late fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the strong presence of Portuguese currency did not allow the Portuguese to dictate the terms of trade. Because the kingdom was strongly centralized, the Portuguese were forced to trade exclusively with the Oba, whose own status and wealth were increased at the expense of the westerners from the sea.

Although the art of brass casting in Benin likely originated before the fifteenth century, the influx of the copper and brass manillas brought by the Portuguese fueled a creative outburst of artistry in the sixteenth century.[4] Not only were more plaques made, but the traditional heads of past Obas that decorated the ancestral altar of the ruling Oba became bigger and heavier. The impact of the wealth brought by the Portuguese is evident in the depiction of Portuguese heads straddling a series of extremely large manillas, reflecting the larger-than-life economic power of the manilla (see Figure 2).[5]

The Portuguese are clearly distinguishable by their western dress, facial hair, and features. Their beards, however, are oddly reminiscent of the ceremonial *eben* swords that chiefs carried during the annual court rituals in honor of the Oba. African craftsmen did not depict the Portuguese as equals, nor as invaders, but as another faction that paid homage to the Oba.

Many brass plaques decorated the palace, the center of royal authority. European art possibly influenced the designs and images on the plaques.[6] African artisans may have derived the rectangular format as well as the relief technique itself from books brought from Europe. The Portuguese brought items from India that may have influenced the style of the plaques as well. Background designs, such as the fourfold leaf motif, reflect a style common in the west at the time, but also symbolize the "*ebe ame*," or river leaves

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[4]An interesting issue to pursue is whether manillas were originally indigenous to Africa or were brought by the Portuguese. At any rate, west Africans continued to use them as currency through the twentieth century. Ryder has traced the explosion of brass casting to the shift from copper to brass in the composition of manillas.

[5]All illustrations, with the exception of Figure 1, are by Margee Bright-Ragland, Instructor of Fine Arts, Dekalb College, Atlanta, Georgia.

[6]See W.B. Forman and Philip Dark, *Benin Art* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1960).

symbolic of the sea god Olokun. This material provides an excellent forum for a discussion of the problems of determining cultural transmission and studying the global interaction of cultures.

Further, Portuguese seamen often appeared by the side of images more commonly associated with the Obas, such as the mudfish, and symbolize the power brought by the influx of wealth. Native artisans portrayed them on the ceremonial bracelets worn by the Oba, alternating with the mudfish, which can be seen in the square designs (see Figure 3). The fact that artisans drew the mudfish and the hair of the Portuguese with the same style of parallel lines enhances the intermingling of the imagery.

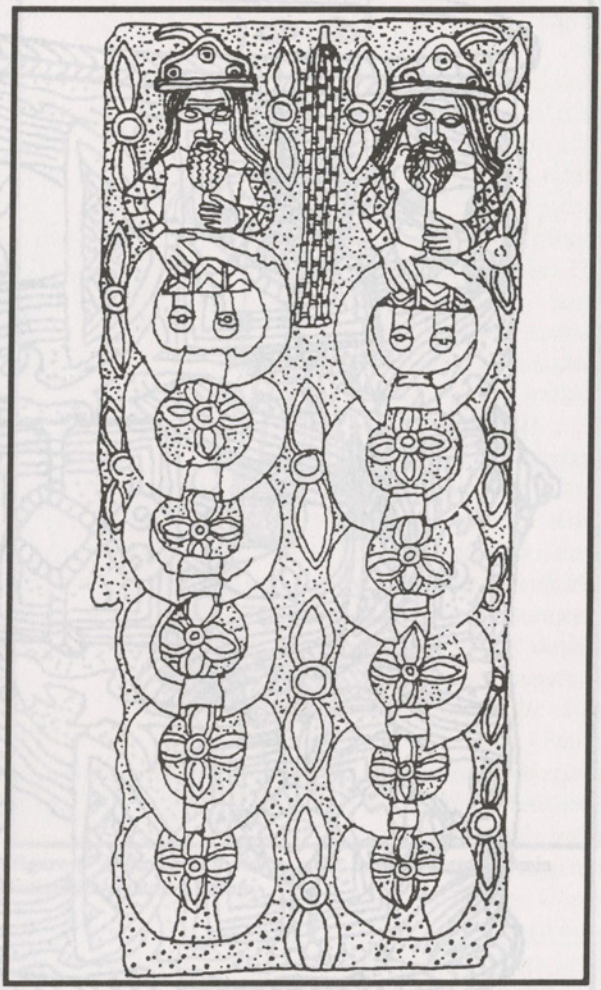

Figure 2. Portuguese perched on stacks of manillas. Based on bronze plaques from the royal court sixteenth-seventeenth century.

The Portuguese served as mercenaries for the Obas, and artisans often depicted them carrying firearms, which the Portuguese introduced to Benin. In the sixteenth century two Europeans, known as Ava and Uti, helped to form the Iwoki guild, which was responsible for the royal firearms. According to the legend, they protected the Oba by flanking him, which is still the custom of the Iwoki today. Africans perhaps base this legend on two

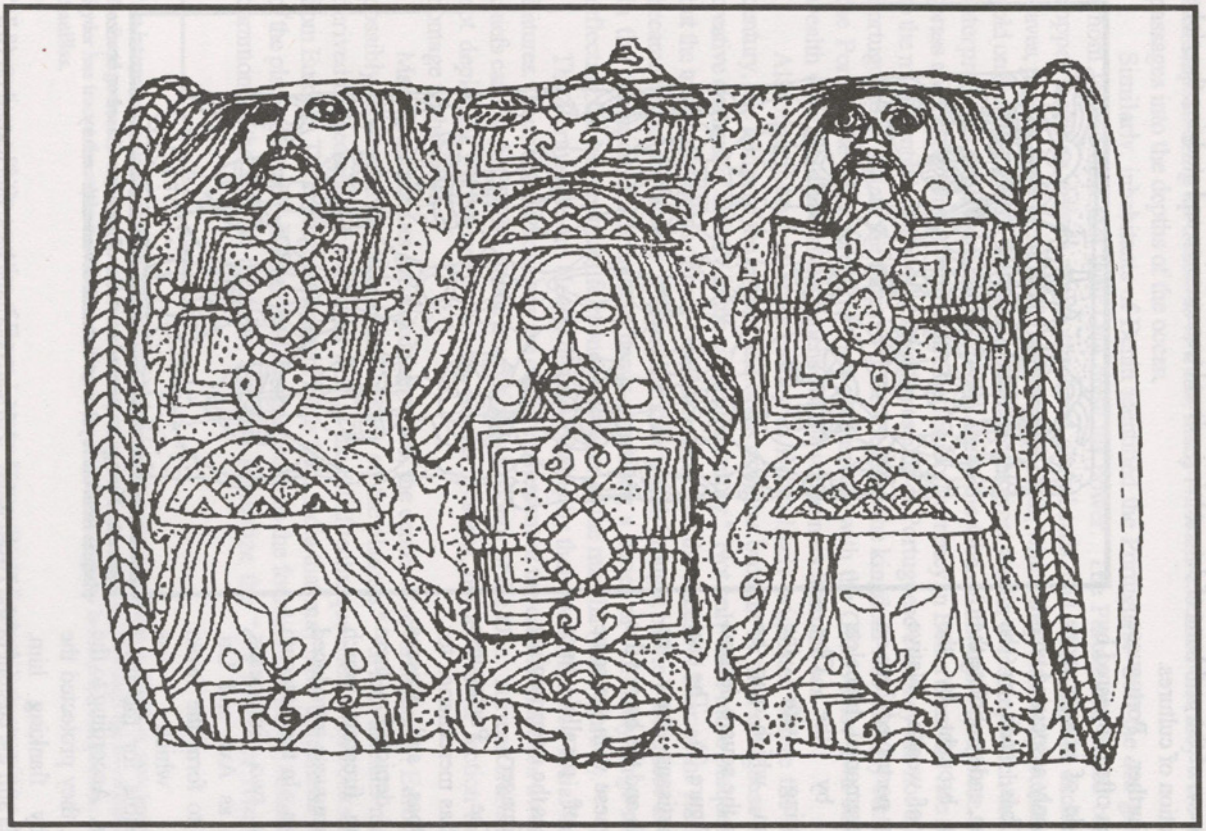

Figure 3. Portuguese traders juxtaposed with the mudfish on ceremonial bracelets of the Oba. Abstract representations of mudfish are visible in the squares between the faces of the Portuguese. From the court of Benin sixteenth to eighteenth century.

Portuguese, Duarte Pires and João Sobrino, who accompanied an Oba on a war campaign.[7] Portrayals of the Iwoki still reflect Portuguese influence (see Figure 4). In statuary, Iwoki wear leopard skin armor combined with the pleated skirt of the Portuguese, in a pose modeled on that of European musketeers.[8]

The art also records the origin of the Oba, and helps to explain a comical incident in which Portuguese misinterpreted native imagery. The account of early Portuguese explorers, such as João Afonso d'Aveiro, told of a custom whereby natives gave the new Oba a brass cross as a token of approval from a powerful ruler to the east, whom they called Oghenne in Benin, or the Oni of Ife. Because the token resembled a Christian cross, the Portuguese hoped that this eastern ruler was from the Kingdom of Prester John. Although they sent missionaries to educate the

Figure 4. A member of the Iwoki guild, from the Court of Benin sixteenth to eighteenth century.

[7]See the letter of Durate Pires to King Manuel, in Hodgkin, 127.

[8]Although the royal craftsmen used Portuguese imagery to convey the function of the Iwoki, it would be a mistake to infer that the Portuguese brought large quantities of arms into Benin. In a letter of November 20, 1514, King Manuel forbade the sale to those who were not Christians. As the Obas of Benin ultimately failed to convert to Christianity, the sale of arms was greatly restricted.

Oba's son, there is no evidence that they achieved any lasting success.[9] Here, they misinterpreted the symbolism of the Oba's court.

Although there is a great deal of debate over the origins of the image in Figure 5, it links the Oba to the divine origins of the kingship in Ife. Tradition held that the Oni rewarded messengers to the Benin Oba with the gift of a cross, indicating their status as freemen. These messengers, possibly representing the creator God of Benin, may have begun to wear crosses after their contact with Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century.

Figure 5. An official displaying the cross pendant, from the Court of Benin sixteenth to seventeenth century.

Although it is uncertain when the cross motif first appeared, native mythology was compatible with Christian imagery, which may account for the later custom of depicting the priests of Benin as Portuguese seamen on the tusks of the royal ancestor altars. The tusks, made of ivory, symbolized the wealth and power of the Oba. Its color symbolized the purity of the Oba, and

[9]Although Durate Pires indicated in his letter of October 20, 1516, to King Manuel that the Oba had ordered the construction of Roman Catholic churches in Benin City, this account cannot be confirmed by archaeology. (See Pires, in Hodgkin, 127; Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*, 50-51.) Despite the fact that the Oba baptized many converts, including his son and successor, many converts reverted to pagan ways as they reached adulthood. The failure of the Portuguese missions is poignantly apparent in a letter of August 30, 1539, written by priests to King Manuel, in which they make clear the Oba's refusal to be turned from his native practices and react distastefully to the pagan customs of Benin. For an English translation of this letter, see A.F.C. Ryder, "The Benin Missions," in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. II, no. 2. See also Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*, 49-50 and 70-71 for a discussion of these issues.

was associated with the sea god Olokun. The Oba controlled the ivory trade, taking one tusk from every elephant, and only he could wear ivory.

Images of Portuguese officials often occur on the tusks, flanking an official wearing a cross. They are dressed in typical sixteenth-century fashion, and their features are depicted according to African convention. In tusks produced in later eras, these figures no longer represent Portuguese seamen, but priests of Benin (see Figure 6). They have slanted eyes, representing a prayerful attitude, and stand with their arms crossed, a ritual gesture of priesthood in the nineteenth century that they derived from the posture of early Portuguese merchants.[10] These images vividly convey the power brought to the Oba through trade with the Portuguese and, even after the Portuguese left Benin, their appearance was the standard way of depicting all foreigners.

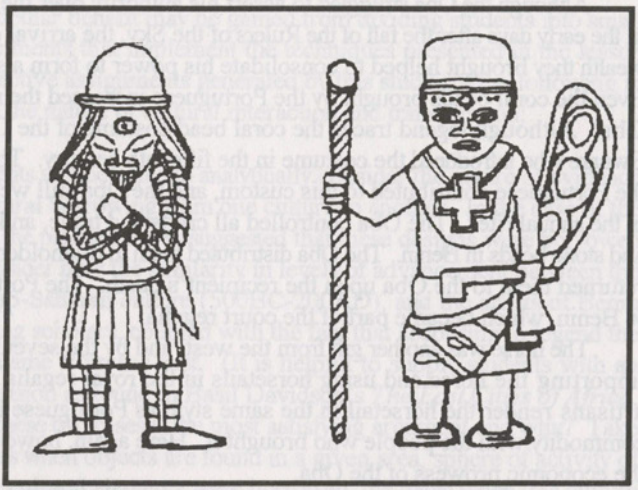

Figure 6. Priest figures from nineteenth-century royal tusks.

Analysis of the Sources

These works are but a few examples that present an African record of the Portuguese. The art of the royal court shows the ways in which Africans employed European commodities, wealth, and imagery. Africans, such as the Oba's chief in Ughoton, the port to which Portuguese trade was restricted, visited Portugal and impressed Ruy de Pina as eloquent and wise.[11] Unlike the experience of the Congo, however, Benin's encounter with Europe did not result in Portuguese domination of Benin, for the power of the Oba was far too centralized. The royal brass casters, bead-

[10]Barbara Blackmun first documented this transformation in her article "From Trader to Priest in Two Hundred Years: The Transformation of a Foreign Figure on Benin Ivories," in *Art Journal*, 47 (no. 2), 128-38.

[11]See Ruy de Pina, in Blake, I; Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*, 30.

workers, and ivory carvers were in the exclusive employ of the Oba. The resurgence in art work in the wake of the Portuguese expedition contributed not only to the image of power and majesty of the Oba, but to his control over society.

Although the Oba struggled to assert his authority over the palace and village chiefs in the early days after the fall of the Rulers of the Sky, the arrival of the Portuguese and the wealth they brought helped to consolidate his power to form a stronger centralized state. Even the coral beads brought by the Portuguese increased the mystique surrounding the Oba. Although legend traces the coral bead costume of the Oba to Ife, it was the Oba Ewuare who introduced the costume in the fifteenth century. The coral beads brought by the Portuguese contributed to this custom, and the Oba still wears the coral bead regalia in the annual rites. The Oba controlled all crafts and trade, and he alone owned all coral and stone beads in Benin. The Oba distributed them to titleholders and chiefs, whose heirs returned them to the Oba upon the recipient's death. The Portuguese also brought hats to Benin, which became part of the court regalia.

The horse was another gift from the west, and by the seventeenth century Benin was importing the horse and using horsetails in the royal regalia. On the palace plaques, artisans render the horsetail in the same style as Portuguese hairstyles, connecting the commodity with the people who brought it. Here again, however, the horse symbolized the economic prowess of the Oba.

By providing the materials that fueled the growth of the Oba's art and his ceremonial identity, the Portuguese unwittingly strengthened the Oba's power. By 1550 it was already apparent that the Europeans were unable to dominate Benin, and trade declined in the late sixteenth century. The extent to which the Oba limited Portuguese activity in Benin is indicated by ships' records of the goods brought to Portugal from Benin.[12] Although the artisans of Benin made many fine vessels and utensils of ivory for the Portuguese, there is no evidence that the Portuguese imported these objects *en masse*. Records of ships entering Lisbon, published accounts of ships' cargoes, and customs tax listings provide information concerning the number of items imported, and corroborate the visual evidence of the art.

Between 1491-1493, ships brought fourteen ivory spoons from the African mainland.[13] Because records were often inexact concerning the origin of these goods or even misidentified the continent of their origin altogether, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make accurate estimates of the numbers of imported ivories. Records do suggest, however, that these goods entered Portugal through private hands, rather than through massive cargoes. The Oba exploited and controlled trade with Portugal and, therefore, was able to further centralize his kingdom.

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[12]See Ryder for an excellent discussion of Portuguese shipping and trade with Benin, 55-65.

[13]Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin*, 55.

Suggested Texts and Projects

This unit is a particularly effective model for the critical examination of many different types of sources and a highly successful way to motivate students to study African history. Using this lesson as a foundation, students may examine many subtle and difficult historical problems. Particular benefit may be gained from dividing students into small groups, and giving assignments that implement the techniques presented in the lesson plan. Among the most effective assignments generated by this study are the following in two small groups explore the nature of cultural interaction and transmission:

Group A: Students will be asked to analytically consider the nature of evidence that may suggest cultural borrowing from one culture to another. In the case of the background motifs of the plaques, it was suggested that these designs were borrowed from Europeans. Consider now the similarity in levels of advancement between the Nok, an Iron Age sub-Saharan culture (500BC-200AD), and the artists of Benin noted by several leading scholars, coupled with the fact that according to legend the ancestors of Benin came from the east. (It is helpful to supply students with an abstract of this discussion as found in Basil Davidson's *The Lost Cities of Africa*, 140-141.) Which of these two cases is the most satisfying argument and why? Take into consideration dates when objects are found in a given area, sphere of activity of those from whom the cultural elements were borrowed, the dates when this culture was the most active, and the degree of similarity found between items from the respective cultures. What criteria can the historian use to conclude that there was borrowed influence?

Group B: Students in this group will be provided with the same information as given to group A, and should consider Basil Davidson's discussion of the similarity in the ideology of kingship of Benin and ancient Meröe, a Nilotic kingdom of the first millennium b.c. (again, supply students with a passage from *The Lost Cities of Africa*, 141). Which of these two cases of possible cultural interaction is the more satisfying argument and why? Take into consideration dates when objects are found in a given area, sphere of activity of those from whom the cultural elements were borrowed, the dates when this culture was the most active, and the degree of similarity found between items from the respective cultures. What criteria can the historian use to conclude that there was borrowed influence?

This lesson is also an effective preparation for further research on the Portuguese in Africa, especially within the context of upper-level courses. The Portuguese experience in the Congo is an excellent research topic, in which students can explore aspects of European culture that Africans borrowed, such as the capitol of the Congo, modeled after Lisbon, and the conversion of King Alfonso and the subsequent progress of Christianity in the kingdom. Students might then compare and contrast the Portuguese success and/or

failure in the Congo and in the Kingdom of Benin, analyzing the factors that allowed them to dominate one society while failing to dominate the other.

The techniques and materials presented here are an effective means of integrating African perspectives into a study of the Age of Discovery, while simultaneously training students to use the analytical tools and methodology of the professional historian. Teaching African art and oral traditions in conjunction with European written documents awakens modern students to the allure and mystery of the Dark Continent, and allows them to experience their own intellectual "voyage of discovery."