

The History of Africa-Cattle, Crops, and Iron

Zeinab Badawi's documentary "Cattle, Crops, and Iron," is a BBC-produced program that highlights the overall significance of different elements of localized African culture. The documentary showcases the importance of cattle, agriculture and iron in the development of specific cultures which in turn led to the development of more complex, modern societies. The domestication of cattle and other livestock stabilized and increased food sources. The cultivation of crops allowed for food surpluses and settled communities. The Iron Age technology provided stronger tools, better weapons, and overall, a more sustainable community. The documentary uses visual aids and voiceovers to support their argument. They also use these elements to create a greater understanding for the audience.

The development of agricultural crops started around the 6000 BC. The shift to agricultural communities proved to be significant because it revolutionized the way humans lived. Instead of nomadic tribes, people started to settle into permanent communities and societies. By staying in one location for an extended period of time, communities were able to grow and prosper. With this stability, crops could be grown, livestock could be domesticated and tools could be developed. As Christopher Ehret discusses in his article "An African Classical Age," by the year 1000 BC, the Bantu and West African communities were creating more complex forms of food production.¹ With these forms of food production, food stability allowed for communities to grow and flourish in other areas including arts and culture.

In the article "Hunting Reputations: Talent, Individuals, and Community in Precolonial South Central Africa, the author Kathryn de Luna explains that with the cultivation of agriculture and discovery of iron, there was a change of community roles and responsibilities. Community members went from all having the same skills to specializing in different areas, farmers,

¹ Christopher Ehret. *An African Classical Age*. (University of Virginia Press, 2001). Pg. 13-14

craftsmen and hunters. Hunters were a select group as there were now fewer of them but they retained the “ideal man” image and were therefore well respected in their communities in the South Central part of Africa.² There is linguistic evidence to support that idea. The word “padu” used as a term of respect or kinship came to mean revered hunter. The word derived from the verb “pa” meaning to give, as the hunter gave his weapons and his catches to his community.³

The documentary provides substantial evidence of the development of agriculture as shown through the study of paleoecology. Paleoecology is the study of plants and biological remains to understand a society or community. Through this process, paleoecologists have discovered what environmental circumstances existed, and what people ate within the studied societies.⁴ The documentary included an interview with a local family in Zimbabwe, learning more about their daily lives and therefore demonstrating the everyday culture in Zimbabwe. The Dube family is reliant on rainfall every year for a plentiful harvest. They plant maize, sorghum, beans, and groundnuts.⁵

The introduction of cattle and other livestock to the African continent was a pivotal development, providing both food and supplies for the communities. Emeritus Professor Ngwabi Bhebe, from Midlands State University in Zimbabwe, discusses with Zeinab Badawi the importance of cattle in Zimbabwe. He explains the history of cattle in these societies. Prominent men in each community owned the cattle as an exhibition of wealth. These owners would have “armies” that would protect the herds from being stolen by others as a way of demonstrating power.⁶ The incorporation of cattle into the culture of Zimbabwe enforced a hierarchical social

² Kathryn M. De Luna. *Hunting Reputations: Talent, Individuals, and Community in Precolonial South Central Africa*. (Journal of African History, 2012). Pg. 281.

³ De Luna. *Hunting Reputations: Talent, Individuals, and Community in Precolonial South Central Africa*. Pg. 287.

⁴ “*The History of Africa*.” Episode 2- Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Narrated by Zeinab Badawi. United Kingdom. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-17)

⁵ “*The History of Africa*.” Episode 2- Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-19)

⁶ “*The History of Africa*.” Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-15)

structure. There is evidence of this importance of cattle that can be understood from specifically studying the Maasai people. Kinama Marite, a local guide and member of the Maasai community, explains how the entire cow is essential. A whole cow can be used as currency but then each part is also needed. The meat is a food source, the blood is medicinal, the dung is used to build homes.⁷

The discovery of iron ore was critical in the growth of these cultures. The process of smelting iron is extensive and requires tools and materials such as a furnace or timber. Iron was revolutionary because it allowed for better tools and weapons. In the documentary, Pathisa Nyathi, a local director of the Amagugu International Heritage Centre, shows Badabwi a type of hoe. He explains that the hoe has ridges on the end which demonstrate that it was for digging not weeding,⁸ indicating the education of the community to differentiate their tools. Pathisa Nyathi also explains the importance of iron in developing weapons. Iron spears were far more effective in combat. Pathisa Nyathi states “those who possessed the iron technology were winning the wars using spears.”⁹ A society with tools and strong weapons cannot only work better but also protect itself thereby creating a stable and safe environment for all.

The development of iron aided the growth of the economy. During the Iron Age in the Kingdom of Meroe, iron was the cornerstone of their economy. Due to the specific nature of iron smelting, the Kingdom of Meroe was able to monopolize the production. Trade flourished between the Kingdom and neighboring societies.¹⁰ Christopher Ehret explains the Commercial Revolution, the expansion of long distance trading. Prior to the Revolution, trade was controlled by political leaders. The Commercial Revolution created opportunities for the establishment of

⁷ “*The History of Africa.*” Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-10)

⁸ “*The History of Africa.*” Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-27)

⁹ “*The History of Africa.*” Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-27:58)

¹⁰ Kevin Shillington. *History of Africa.* (Saint Martin’s Press, 1995) pg.44

colonies along the Mediterranean Sea, normalizing widespread exchanges of ideas, a developed merchant class and a fundamental shift in the economy of West Africa.¹¹

This documentary series is produced by British Broadcasting Company or BBC, with a British narrator. This creates some interesting contrast between continental ideals and beliefs. There are some positives such as displaying the map of Africa because, unfortunately, the average audience member does not know where Zimbabwe or Kenya is on the continent.

This well-developed documentary of African history makes some of the language used by narrator Zeinab Badawi's use of Eurocentric language surprising. The use of the word "hut,"¹² or shelter,¹³ suggests that the homes that the Maasai and Zimbabweans live in are substandard. It is Eurocentric and demeaning to refer to a house that is not European in style as less than a home. In the North, a "hut" is a small, crude, unsound structure. A "shelter" is a temporary residence. Zeinab Badawi uses the word "hut," and then later, "shelter" to describe the homes of people she is interviewing. The footage of these homes demonstrates that they are well-constructed and permanent. However, by using these words, it reinforces the Northern belief in cultural superiority to the African continent.

The other peculiar thing about the documentary was the use of subtitles for Africans who were speaking English.¹⁴ The documentary used professors and experts from Africa who are educated and intelligent. It seems odd to have their words subtitled but not the British expert who spoke in the beginning of the documentary. This also reinforces a Northern prejudice that speaking with an accent is not speaking the language properly.

¹¹ Ehret. *An African Classical Age*. pg. 16-18

¹² "The History of Africa." Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-13)

¹³ "The History of Africa." Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-40)

¹⁴ "The History of Africa." Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-11, 15, 18, 22, 27, 32, 39)

The end of the documentary showed a raindance of the Amagugu, a society in the southwestern part of Zimbabwe, and included an explanation. This was informational for two reasons. It explained the elements of the dance which all had value and reasoning. The legs rattling represents the sound rain makes. The drums represent the thunder.¹⁵ It also explained the culture of Amagugu. Rain is needed for the crops which provide the Amagugu with most of their food. Rain is very important to the Amagugu people. Pathisa Nyathi explains that dance is art and art is a form of documentation.¹⁶ This was significant because it provided evidence of the history of the Amagugu community.

In conclusion, the points made by the documentary about the significance of cattle and the domestication of animals, the development of agriculture, and iron were supported with well-developed linguistic, archeological, and cultural evidence. The images of the Maasai clothing, the Dube family home and the Amagugu raindance in the documentary were able to showcase the true development of the communities and societies.

¹⁵ “*The History of Africa.*” Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-40)

¹⁶ “*The History of Africa.*” Episode 2-Cattle, Crops, and Iron. Kush Communications. 2017. (min-41:31)

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