Popular histories of surfing tell us that Polynesians were the only people to develop surfing, that the first account of surfing was written in Hawai’i in 1778, and that California surfers Bruce Brown, Robert August, and Mike Hynson introduced surfing to West Africa when they traveled there to film the 1966 movie “The Endless Summer.” All these claims are incorrect.

The modern surf cultures currently developing along Africa’s long shoreline are not something new and introduced; they are a rebirth, the remembering and re-imagining of 1,000-year-old traditions. The first known account of surfing was written during the 1640s in what is now Ghana. Surfing was independently developed from Senegal to Angola. Africa possesses thousands of miles of warm, surf-filled waters and populations of strong swimmers and sea-going fisherfolk who knew surf patterns and crewed surf-canoes capable of catching and riding waves upwards of ten feet high.

Africans surfed on three- to five-foot-long wooden surfboards in a prone, sitting, kneeling, or standing position, and in small one-person canoes. Despite Brown’s claim that “The Endless Summer” introduced surfing into Ghana, if viewers shift their eyes away from August and Hynson, they will see Ga youth of Labadi Village, near Accra, Ghana, riding traditional surfboards, which can still be found at some beaches, though most people now ride modern surfboards. The ability of Ga men, in the film, to stand on the Americans’ longboards illustrates their surfing tradition.

Africans also rode longboards, about twelve feet long, and used them to paddle several miles. English anthropologist Robert Rattray provided the best description and photographs of paddleboards on Lake Bosumtwi, located about 100 miles inland of Cape Coast, Ghana. The Asante believe the “anthropomorphic lake god,” Twi, prohibited canoes on the lake. Keeping with
divine sanctions, people fished from paddleboards, called padua or mpadua (plural), and used them to traverse this five-mile (8.5 km) wide crater lake. While it is unclear if coastal peoples surfed these longboards, accounts and photographs illustrate that they paddled them a couple miles out to sea to anchored Western ships. German merchant-adventurer Michael Hemmersam provided the first known record of surfing, which is problematic as he described a sport that was new to him. Believing he was watching Gold Coast children, who were probably Fante in the Cape Coast, Ghana area, learn to swim, he wrote that parents “tie their children to boards and throw them into the water,” with other Europeans providing similar descriptions. Most Africans learned to swim when they were about sixteen months and with more positive reinforcement; such “lessons” would have resulted in many drowned children.

Later accounts are unambiguous. Describing the Fante of the Cape Coast and Elmina region in what is now Ghana, riding wooden surfboards, John Adam wrote in 1823, “[T]hey paddle outside of the surf, when, watching a proper opportunity, they place their frail barks on the tops of high waves, which, in their progress to the shore, carry them along with great velocity. . . . steering the planks with such precision, as to prevent them broaching to; for when that occurs, they are washed off, and have to swim to regain them.” Children “of not more than six or seven years of age, amuse themselves in this way, and swim like ducks.” Likewise, in 1834, while at Accra, Ghana, James Alexander wrote: “From the beach, meanwhile, might be seen boys swimming into the sea, with light boards under their stomachs. They waited for a surf, and came rolling like a cloud on top of it.”

There are also accounts of Africans bodysurfing. In 1887, an English traveler watched an African man named Sua, at home “in his element, dancing up and down and doing fancy performances with the rollers, as if he had lived since his infancy as much in the water as on dry land.” As a wave approached, “he turns his face to the shore and rising on to the top of it he strikes out vigorously with it towards land, and is carried dashing in at a tremendous speed after the same manner as the surf-canoes beach themselves.”

Fishermen often surfed their six-foot-long paddleboards and surf-canoes weighing about fifteen pounds, with accounts describing both off the Cape Verde Islands, Ivory Coast, Congo-Angola, and Cameroon, with “Kru” canoes of Liberia being heavily documented. In 1861, Thomas Hutchinson observed Batanga fishermen from southern Cameroon riding surf-canoes “no more than six feet in length, fourteen to sixteen inches in width, and from four to six inches in depth” that weighed about fifteen pounds. Describing how work turned to play Hutchinson penned:

During my few days stay at Batanga, I observed that from the more serious and industrial occupation of fishing they would turn to racing on the tops of the surging billows which broke on the sea shore; at one spot more particularly, which, owing to the presence of an extensive reef, seemed to be the very place for a continuous swell of several hundred yards in length. Four or six of them go out steadily, dodging the rollers as they come on, and mounting atop of them with the nimbleness and security of ducks. Reaching the outermost roller, they turn the canoes stems shoreward with a single stroke of the paddle, and mounted on the top of the wave, they are borne towards the shore, steering with the paddle alone. By a peculiar action of this, which tends to elevate the stern of the canoe so that it will receive the full impulsive force of the advancing billow, on they come, carried along with all its impetuous rapidity.

“Showing various positions on mpadua” illustrates the type of paddleboards used for centuries by the Asante on Lake Bosumtwi, in what is now Ghana. (1923)

“Dahomey — Kotonou—Negres plongeant pour attraper des sous”

Two men on surfboards/paddleboards are seen in the top right corner of this early nineteenth-century postcard of Cotonou, in what is now the modern country of Benin. Throughout Africa, it was common for ship passengers to throw coins into the water and watch males dive underwater to retrieve them. The photograph perhaps predates the 1908 completion of Cotonou’s harbor.
Surfing was a means for opening up economic opportunities. It allowed African youth to critically understand surf-zones so they could uniquely traverse them in surf-canoes, linking coastal communities to offshore fisheries and coastal shipping lanes. Atlantic Africa possesses few natural harbors and waves break along much of its coastline. The only way many coastal people could access the ocean’s resources was by designing surf-canoes that sliced through waves when launching from beaches and were fast, agile, and maneuverable, allowing them to surf waves ashore.

Surfing was the intergenerational transmission of wisdom that transformed surf-zones into social and cultural places, where youth holistically experienced the ocean. Suspending their bodies in the drink and positioning themselves in the curl, they learned about surf-zones by seeing and feeling how the ocean pushed and pulled their bodies. Youth learned about wavelengths (the distance between waves), the physics of breakers, and that waves form in sets with several-minute intervals between sets. Importantly, surfing taught youth that to catch waves one needed to match their speed; something Westerners did not comprehend until the late nineteenth century. Documenting how surf-canoemen utilized childhood lessons, an Englishman noted that they “count the Seas [waves], and know when to paddle safely on or off,” often waiting to surf the last and largest set wave. In an age with few energy sources—when societies harnessed wind, animal, and, perhaps, river power—Atlantic Africans used waves to slingshot surf-canoes laden with fish or tons of cargo ashore, being "Batanga Canoes"

The roughly six-foot-long dugout canoes that Batanga men surfed were smaller and lighter than contemporary surfboards. Mary H. Kingsley, West African Studies (London, 1901). Author’s collection.
the only people to bridle waves’ energy as part of their daily productive labor. Surf-canoemen floated colonial economies, transporting virtually all the goods exported out of and imported into Africa between ship and shore from the 1400s into the 1950s, when modern ports were constructed.

During the 1400s, surf-canoemen introduced Europeans to the pleasures of surfing, since few Europeans at the time could swim well enough to surf. In 1835, Horatio Bridge provided an exaggerated account of surf-canoeing at Cape Coast, writing, “The landing is effected in large canoes, which convey passengers close to the rocks, safely and without being drenched, although the surf dashes fifty feet in height. There is a peculiar enjoyment in being raised, by an irresistible power beneath you, upon the high rollers, and then dropped into the hollow of the waves, as if to visit the bottom of the ocean.” Some surf-canoemen attached a chair to the front of their canoes, where especially intrepid white passengers could sit.

Surf-canoemen knew Europeans feared drowning and being devoured by sharks the instant they fell into African waters. Using this knowledge, they inflated the tips received from passengers by engaging in nautical games of chicken, as Paul Isert observed on October 16, 1783, at Christianburg Castle, Accra. The ancestral realm lay at the bottom of the ocean, while the cottonwood’s soul continued to dwell in its branches. Surf-canoes were sacred objects, carved with iron tools from sacred silk cottonwood trees, while the surf-zones, whirlpools, and waterfalls, are the favorite abode of water spirits, including Mami Wata, with the sound of moving water echoing spirits’ voices. Surf-canoes and aquatic deities who rewarded them with safe passages and prosperous voyages. 

At the same time he struck both sides of the canoe several times with his clenched fist. He worried us Europeans to hold fast. The whole performance was carried out with such gravity that we felt almost as if we were preparing for death. An additional cause for alarm is that, having started to go through the breakers, they must often paddle back again because they had not timed it to the right moment. They are said to do this often deliberately in order to torment the Whites in the breakers for a long time, so that in acknowledgment of their great struggle they would be given a larger bottle of brandy. In a few minutes, however, we were safely across and our boat was on the sand.

As surfers must realize, these Ga surf-canoemen prolonged Europeans’ time in surf-zones by pretending their timing was off, as “it is customary on” such occasions for “each passenger” to “make a handsome present” to the surf-canoemen.

Surf-canoes were sacred objects, carved with iron tools from sacred silk cottonwood trees, while the ocean remains a spiritual place. Tall and majestic, cottonwoods connected the heavens and earth, with some societies believing the souls of children waiting to be born resided within them. Surf-canoes had a gender that determined how they surfted waves, while the cottonwood’s soul continued to dwell in surf-canoes, communicating with water spirits.

The currents of the African diaspora forcibly transplanted enslaved Africans and their cultures in the Americas. There, Mami Wata and other deities found new waters to roam, and captives recreated aquatic traditions. Accounts indicate that, by the mid-1700s, enslaved Africans were surfing and surf-canoeing from South Carolina down to Brazil.