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States and Societies of Sub-Saharan Africa



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A remarkable oral tradition preserves the story of the lion prince Sundiata, thirteenth-century founder of the Mali empire in west Africa. Oral traditions include stories, histories, epics, and other accounts transmitted by professional singers and storytellers known in Africa as griots. Until scholars began to collect and publish African oral traditions about the middle of the twentieth century, the story of Sundiata was available only when a griot recited it.

According to the oral tradition, Sundiata's father ruled a small west African kingdom in the northeastern part of what is now Guinea. Despite his royal parentage, Sundiata had a difficult childhood, since a congenitally defective leg left him partially crippled. When the old king died, his enemies invaded the kingdom and killed the royal offspring, sparing the child Sundiata because they thought his physical condition would prevent him from posing a threat to their ambitions. But Sundiata overcame his injury, learned to use the bow and arrow, and strengthened himself by hunting in the forest. As Sundiata grew stronger, his enemies began to fear him, and they forced him to seek refuge in a neighboring kingdom. While in exile, Sundiata distinguished himself as a warrior and assembled a powerful cavalry force staffed by loyal followers and allies.

About 1235 Sundiata returned to his homeland and claimed the throne. His cavalry slashed through the countryside, defeating his enemies almost at will. Within a few years he had overcome resistance, established the Mali empire, and consolidated his rule throughout the valley of the Niger River. Although he respected traditional religious beliefs and magical powers, Sundiata was also a Muslim, and he welcomed Muslim merchants from north Africa into his realm. He built a capital city at Niani, which soon became a thriving commercial center. Indeed, as a result of its control of the gold trade—and the political stability provided by Sundiata—the Mali empire became probably the wealthiest land in sub-Saharan Africa. For two centuries after Sundiata's death about 1260, the lion prince's legacy shaped the lives of west African peoples and linked west Africa with north Africa and the Mediterranean basin.

From the classical era forward, peoples from east Asia to the Mediterranean basin established extensive networks of trade and communication. African peoples living south of the Sahara desert participated in the larger economy of the eastern hemisphere, though not so fully as their counterparts in north Africa, who from ancient times were prominent in the trading world of the Mediterranean basin. Geographic conditions help to explain why trade and communication networks did not embrace sub-Saharan Africa as readily as they did other regions: the Sahara desert poses a formidable challenge to overland travelers from the north, the African coastlines offer few good natural harbors, and cataracts complicate travel up the continent's major rivers.

Sundiata (soot)

OPPOSITE: A bronze plaque from the kingdom of Benin depicts a local chief flanked by warriors and attendants.

Nevertheless, like their Eurasian and north African counterparts, peoples of sub-Saharan Africa organized productive societies, built powerful states, and participated in large-scale networks of communication and exchange. Internal African processes drove much of that development. Between 1000 and 1500 C.E., in the wake of the Bantu and other migrations (discussed in chapter 3), peoples of sub-Saharan Africa continued to expand the amount of territory under cultivation and to establish agricultural societies. Furthermore, as their population increased, they organized states, developed centers of economic specialization, and carried on interregional trade. Alongside these internal processes, relations with other peoples of the eastern hemisphere also profoundly influenced the development of African societies. From the early centuries C.E. to 1500 and later as well, trade with lands of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean basins encouraged African peoples to organize their societies so as to produce commodities desired by consumers throughout much of the eastern hemisphere. This trade promoted urban development, the organization of large states and empires, and the introduction of new food crops and new religious beliefs into sub-Saharan Africa.

Effects of Early African Migrations

By 1000 C.E. Bantu-speaking peoples had settled in most parts of Africa south of the equator, and Kushite, Sudanese, Mande, and other peoples had also established communities in lands far from their original homes. Some African peoples undertook small-scale migrations long thereafter, even into the nineteenth century. By about 1000, however, most of the migrations were complete, and for the next several centuries, African peoples built societies on the foundation of small communities that the Bantu and other migrations had generated.

Agriculture and Population Growth

The principal early result of the Bantu and other migrations was to spread agriculture and herding to almost all parts of Africa, excluding deserts and dense, equatorial rain forests. As they established agricultural societies, cultivators and herders displaced many of the hunting, gathering, and fishing peoples who previously inhabited sub-Saharan Africa and absorbed them into their societies. After about 500 B.C.E., most Bantu peoples possessed iron metallurgy, which enabled them to fashion iron axes, adzes, and hoes that facilitated further clearing of lands and extension of agriculture. By the early centuries C.E., cultivation and herding had reached the southernmost parts of Africa. Yams, sorghum, and millet were the dietary staples of many peoples in south Africa, and the indigenous Khoi people adopted cattle raising even before Bantu and Kushite herders moved into the region. Those developments resulted in increased agricultural production, rising population, and pressure for continuing migration to new territories.

The introduction of bananas to Africa encouraged a fresh migratory surge. First domesticated in southeast Asia, bananas entered Africa by way of sea-lanes across the Indian Ocean. During the late centuries B.C.E., Malay seafarers from the islands that make up modern Indonesia sailed west beyond India, and by the early centuries C.E. they were exploring the east African coasts. Between about 300 and 500 C.E., they colonized the island of Madagascar and established banana cultivation there. (Apart from bananas, they also brought Asian yams, taro, chickens, and southeast Asian cultural traditions. Malagasy, the language spoken on Madagascar even today, belongs to the Austronesian family of languages.) From Madagascar, bananas easily made the

Bananas

jump to the east African mainland. By 500 C.E. several varieties of bananas had become well established in Africa. They provided a nutritious supplement to Bantu diets and enabled the Bantu to expand into heavily forested regions where yams and millet did not grow well. Thus cultivation of bananas increased the supply of food available to the Bantu, enriched their diets, and allowed them to expand more rapidly than before.

The population history of sub-Saharan Africa clearly reflects the significance of iron metallurgy and bananas. In 400 B.C.E., before iron working had deeply influenced the continent's societies, the population of sub-Saharan Africa stood at about 3.5 million. By the turn of the millennium, human numbers exceeded 11 million. By 800 C.E., after banana cultivation had spread throughout the continent, the sub-Saharan population had climbed to 17 million. And by 1000, when the Bantu migrations had introduced agriculture and iron metallurgy to most regions of sub-Saharan Africa, the population had passed 22 million.

The continuing Bantu migrations, the expansion of Bantu population, and the establishment of new Bantu communities contributed to changes in relationships between Bantu and foraging peoples such as the forest dwellers of central Africa (the people once referred to as "pygmies"). In earlier times, the Bantu had often regarded the forest peoples as useful guides to environments that were unfamiliar to the Bantu, and oral traditions suggest that they relied on foragers' expert knowledge to learn about the possibilities that new environments offered. As Bantu populations surged, however, it became increasingly difficult for foragers to flourish. Some forest peoples joined the cultivators and effectively integrated into Bantu society. Others retreated into the forests, where they were able to sustain small-scale societies by becoming forest specialists and providing forest products such as animal skins in exchange for iron tools produced by neighboring Bantu communities.

African Political Organization

By 1000 C.E., after more than two millennia of migrations, the Bantu had approached the limits of their expansion. Because agricultural peoples already occupied most of the continent, migrating into new territories and forming new settlements was much more difficult than in previous centuries. Instead of migrating in search of new lands to cultivate, then, African peoples developed increasingly complex forms of government that enabled them to organize their existing societies more efficiently.

Scholars have sometimes used the terms *stateless society* and *segmentary society* to refer to one form of social organization widely prevalent in Africa during and after the Bantu migrations. Although somewhat misleading, since they seem to imply that Bantu societies had little or no government, these terms accurately reflect the fact that early Bantu societies did not depend on an elaborate hierarchy of officials or a bureaucratic apparatus to administer their affairs. Instead, Bantu peoples governed themselves mostly through family and kinship groups.

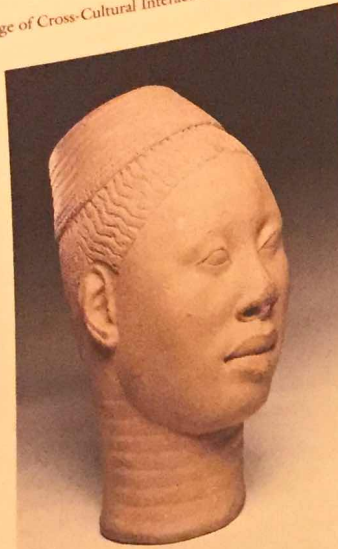
Bantu peoples usually settled in villages with populations averaging about one hundred people. Male heads of families constituted a village's ruling council, which decided the public affairs for the entire group. The most prominent of the family heads presided over the village as a chief and represented the settlement when it dealt with neighboring peoples. A group of villages constituted a district, which became the principal focus of ethnic loyalties. Usually there was no chief or larger government for the district. Instead, village chiefs negotiated on matters concerning two or more villages. Meanwhile, within individual villages, family and kinship groups disciplined their own members as necessary.

Population Growth

Bantu and Forest Peoples

Kin-Based Societies

Chiefdoms



According to legend, this handsome terra-cotta head represents an ambitious warrior who usurped power in the small state of Ife (in modern Nigeria). Produced shortly after 1000 C.E., it testifies to the increasing tensions in sub-Saharan politics after the turn of the millennium.

eral regions of sub-Saharan Africa after about 1000 C.E. The kingdoms of Ife and Benin, for example, arose in the forested regions of west Africa. Both realms were city-states in which the court and urban residents controlled the surrounding countryside through family relationships and political alliances. Both Ife and Benin also produced magnificent sculptures that put human faces and figures to the early history of sub-Saharan Africa. Local kingdoms appeared also in southern Africa and central Africa.

Kingdom of Kongo

One of the most active areas of political development was the basin of the Congo River (also known as the Zaire River), a region where brisk economic development supported the emergence of large as well as small kingdoms. After about 1000 C.E. population pressures and military challenges encouraged kin-based societies in the Congo region to form small states embracing a few villages each. By 1200 conflict between these small states had resulted in the organization of larger, regional principalities that could resist political and military pressures better than small kingdoms could. One of the more prosperous of the Congolese states was the Kingdom of Kongo, which participated actively in trade networks involving copper, raffia cloth, and nzimbu shells from the Atlantic Ocean. During the fourteenth century the kingdom of Kongo came to embrace much of the modern-day Republic of the Congo and Angola.

This type of organization lends itself particularly well to small-scale communities, but kin-based societies often grew to large proportions. Some networks of villages and districts organized the public affairs of several hundred thousand people. By the nineteenth century, for example, the Tiv people of Nigeria, numbering almost one million, conducted their affairs in a kin-based society built on a foundation of family and clan groups.

After about 1000 C.E., however, kin-based societies faced difficult challenges. Population growth strained resources, but few lands were available for migrants to settle. Conflicts between villages and districts became more frequent and more intense. Increased conflict encouraged Bantu communities to organize military forces for both offensive and defensive purposes, and military organization in turn encouraged the development of more formal structures of government. Many districts fell under the leadership of powerful chiefs, who overrode kinship networks and imposed their own authority on their territories. Some of these chiefs conquered their neighbors and consolidated their lands into small kingdoms. These local kingdoms emerged in sev-

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The central government of Kongo included the king and officials who oversaw military, judicial, and financial affairs. Beneath the central government were six provinces administered by governors, each of whom supervised several districts administered by subordinate officials. Within the districts, villages ruled by chiefs provided local government. Though not the only kingdom in sub-Saharan Africa, Kongo was perhaps the most tightly centralized of the early Bantu kingdoms. In most cases the king or other central administrators could appoint or replace local officials at will, and the central government maintained a royal currency system based on cowries, seashells that came from the Indian Ocean. The kingdom of Kongo provided effective organization from the fourteenth until the mid-seventeenth century, when Portuguese slave traders undermined the authority of the kings and the central government. Kin-based societies did not disappear with the emergence of formal states. On the contrary, they survived into the nineteenth century in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Yet regional states and large kingdoms became increasingly prominent during the centuries after 1000 C.E. as Bantu and other African peoples responded to population pressures and military challenges facing their societies.

Islamic Kingdoms and Empires

While Bantu peoples organized societies on the basis of African traditions, merchants from north Africa and southwest Asia introduced their Islamic faith to sub-Saharan Africa. Islam arrived by two routes: it went to west Africa overland by trans-Saharan camel caravans, and it traveled to coastal east Africa over the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean in the vessels of merchant-mariners. After the eighth century C.E., Islam profoundly influenced the political, social, and economic development of sub-Saharan Africa as well as its cultural and religious development.

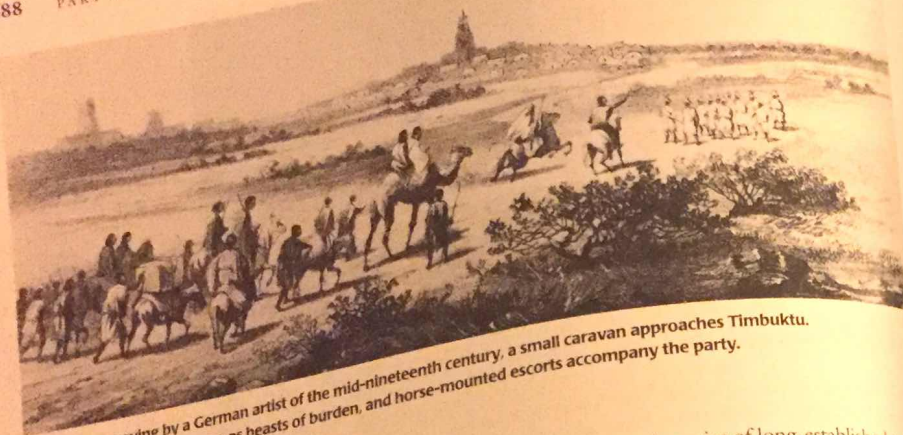
Trans-Saharan Trade and Islamic States in West Africa

The Sahara desert has never served as an absolute barrier to communication between human societies. Small numbers of nomadic peoples have lived in the desert itself ever since a process of desiccation created the Sahara beginning about 5000 B.C.E. Those nomads migrated around the desert and had dealings with other peoples settled on its fringes. Even in ancient and classical times, merchants occasionally organized commercial expeditions across the desert, although the value and volume of trade in the Mediterranean basin greatly exceeded that crossing the Sahara.

The arrival of the camel quickened the pace of communication and transportation across the Sahara. Camels came to north Africa from Arabia, by way of Egypt and the Sudan, about the seventh century B.C.E. During the late centuries B.C.E., a special camel saddle, which took advantage of the animals' distinctive physical structure, also made its way to north Africa. Because a caravan took seventy to ninety days to cross the Sahara and because camels could travel long distances before needing water, they proved to be useful beasts of burden in an arid region. After about 300 C.E. camels increasingly replaced horses and donkeys as the preferred transport animals throughout the Sahara as well as in the deserts of central Asia.

When Arab conquerors established their Islamic faith in north Africa during the seventh and eighth centuries, they also integrated the region into a rapidly expanding zone of commerce and communication. Thus it was natural for Muslims in north Africa to explore the potential of trade across the Sahara. By the late eighth century, Islamic merchants had trekked across the desert and established commercial relations with

Camels



In this engraving by a German artist of the mid-nineteenth century, a small caravan approaches Timbuktu. Camels and donkeys serve as beasts of burden, and horse-mounted escorts accompany the party.

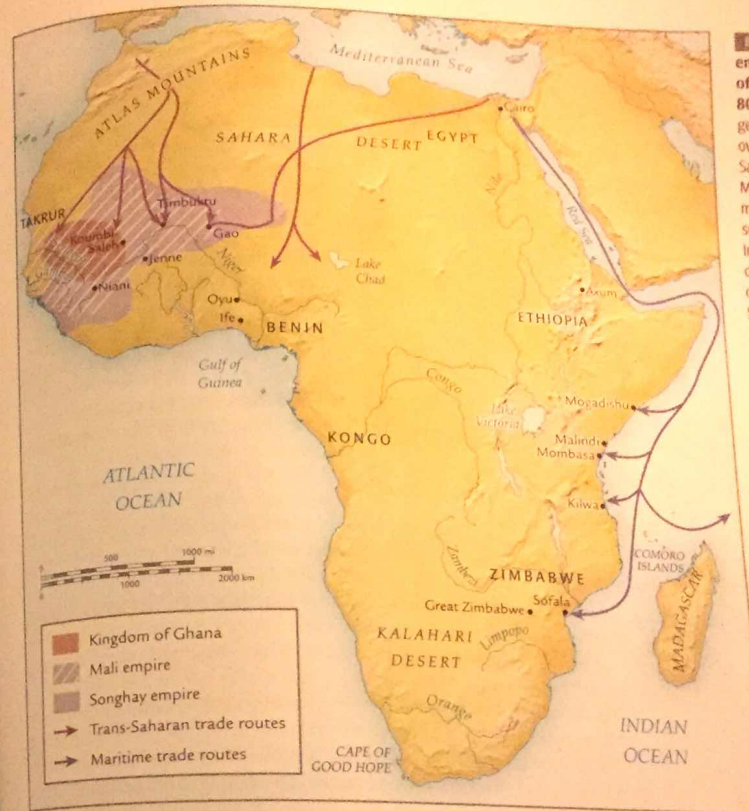
The Kingdom of Ghana

societies in sub-Saharan west Africa. There they found a series of long-established trading centers such as Gao, a terminus of caravan routes across the Sahara that offered access to the Niger River valley, which was a flourishing market for copper, ironware, cotton textiles, salt, grains, and carnelian beads.

The principal state of west Africa at the time of the Muslims' arrival there was the kingdom of Ghana (not related to the modern state of Ghana), situated between the Senegal and Niger rivers in a region straddling the border between the modern states of Mali and Mauritania. Ghana emerged as a kingdom at an uncertain but early date, according to legends preserved by Arab travelers, as many as twenty-two kings ruled in Ghana before Muhammad and his companions embarked on the *hijra*. Ghana probably developed as a state during the fourth or fifth century C.E. when settled, agricultural peoples sought to protect their societies from the raids of camel-riding nomads who increasingly came out of the Sahara. When Muslims arrived in west Africa, the kingdom of Ghana was a regional state much like others that were emerging or soon would appear elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Gold Trade

As trade and traffic across the desert increased, Ghana underwent a dramatic transformation. It became the most important commercial site in west Africa because it was the center for trade in gold, which was in high demand because of economic development and surging trade throughout the Sahara to Ghana in search of gold for consumers in the Mediterranean basin and elsewhere in the Islamic world. Ghana itself did not produce gold, but the kings procured nuggets from lands to the south—probably from the region around the headwaters of the Niger, Gambia, and Senegal rivers, which enjoyed the world's largest supply of gold available at the time. By controlling and taxing trade in the precious metal, the kings both enriched and strengthened their realm. Apart from gold, merchants from Ghana also provided ivory and slaves for traders from north Africa. In exchange, they received horses, cloth, small manufactured wares, and salt—a crucial commodity in the tropics, but one that local sources could not supply in large quantities.



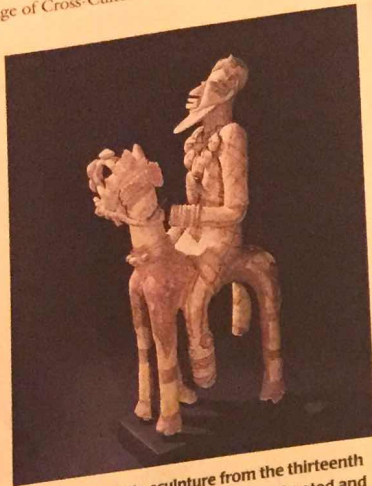
Map 19.1 Kingdoms, empires, and city-states of sub-Saharan Africa, 800–1500 C.E. After the emergence of Islam, trans-Saharan overland routes linked sub-Saharan west Africa with the Mediterranean region, and maritime trade routes linked sub-Saharan east Africa to the Indian Ocean basin. What role did trade play in the emergence of cities and states in sub-Saharan Africa?

Integration into trans-Saharan trade networks brought enormous wealth and considerable power to Ghana. The kingdom's capital and principal trading site stood at Koumbi-Saleh, a small town today but a thriving commercial center with a population of some fifteen thousand to twenty thousand people when the kingdom was at its height, from the ninth to the twelfth century. Al-Bakri, a Spanish Muslim traveler of the mid-eleventh century, described Koumbi-Saleh as a flourishing site with buildings of stone and more than a dozen mosques. Koumbi-Saleh's wealth also supported a large number of *qadis* and Muslim scholars. From taxes levied on trade passing through Ghana, the kings financed a large army—al-Bakri reported that they could field two hundred thousand warriors—that protected the sources of gold, maintained order in the kingdom, kept allied and tributary states in line, and defended Ghana against nomadic incursions from the Sahara.

By about the tenth century, the kings of Ghana had converted to Islam. Their conversion led to improved relations with Muslim merchants from north Africa as well as Muslim nomads from the desert who transported trade goods across the Sahara. It

Koumbi-Saleh

Islam in West Africa



This terracotta sculpture from the thirteenth or fourteenth century depicts a helmeted and armored warrior astride a horse with elaborate harness and head protection.

teenth century, raids from the desert weakened the kingdom, but political leadership in west Africa fell to the powerful Mali empire, which emerged just as the kingdom of Ghana dissolved.

The lion prince Sundiata (reigned 1230–1255) built the Mali empire during the first half of the thirteenth century after his return from exile. While away from home, he made astute alliances with local rulers, gained a reputation for courage in battle, and assembled a large army dominated by cavalry. By about 1235 he had consolidated his hold on the Mali empire, which embraced Ghana as well as other neighboring kingdoms in the regions surrounding the Senegal and Niger rivers. The empire included most of the modern state of Mali and extended also to lands now known as Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, and Sierra Leone.

Mali benefited from trans-Saharan trade on an even larger scale than Ghana did. From the thirteenth until the late fifteenth century, Mali controlled and taxed almost all trade passing through west Africa. Enormous caravans with as many as twenty-five thousand camels linked Mali to north Africa. The capital city of Niani attracted merchants seeking to enter the gold trade, and market cities on the caravan routes such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne became prosperous centers featuring buildings of brick and stone. Like the later kings of Ghana, the rulers of Mali honored Islam and provided protection, lodging, and comforts for Muslim merchants from the north. Although they did not force Islam on their realm, they encouraged its spread on a voluntary basis.

The significance of trade and Islam for west Africa became clearest during the reign of Sundiata's grand-nephew Mansa Musa, who ruled Mali from 1312 to 1337, during the high point of the empire. Mansa Musa observed Islamic tradition by making pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324–1325. His party formed a gargantuan caravan that included thousands of soldiers, attendants, subjects, and slaves as well as a hundred

also brought them recognition and support from Muslim states in north Africa. The kings of Ghana made no attempt to impose Islam forcibly on their society—unlike the neighboring kings of Takrur, who zealously campaigned for the conversion of their entire kingdom—nor did they accept Islam exclusively even for their own purposes. Instead, they continued to observe traditional religious customs: al-Bakri mentioned, for example, that native religious specialists practiced magic and kept idols in the woods surrounding the royal palace at Koumbi-Saleh. Even in the absence of efforts to impose Islam on Ghana, however, the faith attracted converts, particularly among those engaged in trade with Muslim merchants from the north.

As the kingdom expanded to the north, it became vulnerable to attacks by nomadic peoples from the Sahara who sought to seize some of the kingdom's wealth. During the early thirteenth century, the kingdom collapsed.

Sources from the Past

Sundiata and the Reconstruction of Niani

African griots tell many different versions of an oral tradition dealing with Sundiata and his establishment of the Mali empire. Some dwell on Sundiata's cunning and clever strategy, others on his courage and physical valor. After recounting his birth, childhood, and campaign to conquer Mali, some oral traditions emphasize Sundiata's connections with his birthplace and capital city, Niani. The following selection deals with Sundiata's restoration of stability and prosperity and especially his services to Niani.

The troops were marching along singing the "Hymn to the Bow," which the crowd took up. New songs flew from mouth to mouth. Young women offered the soldiers cool water and cola nuts. And so the triumphal march across Mali ended outside Niani, Sundiata's city.

It was a ruined town which was beginning to be rebuilt by its inhabitants. A part of the ramparts had been destroyed and the charred walls still bore the marks of fire. From the top of the hill, Djata [a nickname for Sundiata] looked on Niani, which looked like a dead city. . . . The survivors of the catastrophe were standing in rows on the Mali road. The children were waving branches, a few young women were singing, but the adults were mute. . . .

With Sundiata peace and happiness entered Niani. Lovingly Sogolon's son [i.e., Sundiata] had his native city rebuilt. He restored in the ancient style his father's old enclosure where he had grown up. People came from all the villages of Mali to settle in Niani. The walls had to be destroyed to enlarge the town, and new quarters were built for each kin group in the enormous army. . . .

In their new-found peace the villages knew prosperity again, for with Sundiata happiness had come into everyone's home. Vast fields of millet, rice, cotton, indigo, and fonio surrounded the villages. Whoever worked always had something to live on. Each year long caravans carried the taxes in kind [in the form of grains] to Niani. You could go from village to village without fearing brigands. A thief would have his right hand chopped off and if he stole again he would be put to the sword [in accordance with Islamic law].

New villages and new towns sprang up in Mali and elsewhere. "Dyulas," or traders, became numerous and during the reign of Sundiata the world knew happiness.

SOURCE: D. T. Niane, ed. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Trans. by G. D. Pickett. Harlow, England: Longman, 1965, pp. 80–82.

There are some kings who are powerful through their military strength. Everybody trembles before them, but when they die nothing but ill is spoken of them. Others do neither good nor ill and when they die they are forgotten. Others are feared because they have power, but they know how to use it and they are loved because they love justice. Sundiata belonged to this group. He was feared, but loved as well. He was the father of Mali and gave the world peace. After him the world has not seen a greater conqueror, for he was the seventh and last conqueror. He had made the capital of an empire out of his father's village, and Niani became the navel of the earth. In the most distant lands Niani was talked of and foreigners said, "Travellers from Mali can tell lies with impunity," for Mali was a remote country for many peoples.

The griots, fine talkers that they were, used to boast of Niani and Mali saying: "If you want salt, go to Niani, for Niani is the camping place of the [trans-Saharan] caravans. If you want gold, go to Niani, for Bouré, Bam-bougou, and Wagadou [sources of west African gold] work for Niani. If you want fine cloth, go to Niani, for the Mecca road passed by Niani. If you want fish, go to Niani, for it is there that the fishermen of Maouti and Djenné come to sell their catches. If you want meat, go to Niani, the country of the great hunters, and the land of the ox and the sheep. If you want to see an army, go to Niani, for it [is] there that the united forces of Mali are to be found. If you want to see a great king, go to Niani, for it is there that the son of Sogolon lives, the man with two names."

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

To what extent was Sundiata's support for Islam an issue in the shaping of his reputation?

Sundiata

The Mali Empire and Trade

Mansa Musa

Mansa Musa enjoyed a widespread reputation as the wealthiest king in the world. On this map, prepared in 1375 by a cartographer from the Mediterranean island of Majorca, Mansa Musa holds a gold nugget about the size of a grapefruit.



Mansa Musa and Islam

camels carrying satchels of gold. Mansa Musa bestowed lavish gifts on those who hosted him along the way, and during his three-month visit to Cairo, he distributed so much gold that the metal's value declined by as much as 25 percent on local markets. Mansa Musa drew great inspiration from his pilgrimage to Mecca, and he sent promising students to Mali he took his religion even more seriously than before. He built mosques, particularly in the trading cities frequented by Muslim merchants, and he sent promising students to study with distinguished Islamic scholars and north African teachers, including established religious schools and brought in Arabian and north African teachers, including four descendants of Muhammad himself, to make Islam better known in Mali.

Within a century of Mansa Musa's reign, Mali would be in serious decline: factions crippled the central government, provinces seceded from the empire, and military pressures came both from neighboring kingdoms and from desert nomads. By the late fifteenth century, the Songhay empire had completely overcome Mali. Yet Mansa Musa and other Mali rulers had established a tradition of centralized government that the Songhay realm itself would continue, and they had ensured that Islam would have a prominent place in west African society over the long term.

The Indian Ocean Trade and Islamic States in East Africa

While trans-Saharan caravan traffic linked west Africa to the larger trading world of the eastern hemisphere, merchant-mariners sailing the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean performed a similar service for coastal east Africa. Indian and Persian sailors had visited the east African coasts after about 500 B.C.E., and Hellenistic and Roman mariners sailed through the Red Sea en route to the same coasts. After the late centuries B.C.E., Malay seafarers also ventured into the western Indian Ocean from their island homelands in southeast Asia, and by the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. they had established colonies on the island of Madagascar. Those early visitors had limited opportunities to trade, however, since east African populations consisted mostly of hunting, gathering, and fishing peoples.

By the second century C.E., Bantu peoples had populated much of east Africa. They introduced agriculture, cattle herding, and iron metallurgy to the region, and

here, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, they founded complex societies governed by small, local states. As their population increased, Bantu peoples founded settlements on the coasts and offshore islands as well as the interior regions of east Africa. Those coast dwellers supplemented their agricultural production with ocean fishing and maritime trade. They were the builders of Swahili society.

Swahili is an Arabic term meaning "coasters," referring to those who engaged in trade along the east African coast. The Swahili dominated the east African coast from Mogadishu in the north to Kilwa, the Comoro Islands, and Sofala in the south. They spoke Swahili, a Bantu language supplemented with words and ideas borrowed from Arabic. Swahili peoples developed different dialects, but they communicated readily among themselves because individuals frequently visited other Swahili communities in their oceangoing crafts. Indeed, all along the east African coast, Swahili society underwent similar patterns of development with respect to language, religion, architecture, and technology.

By the tenth century, Swahili society attracted increasing attention from Islamic merchants. From the interior regions of east Africa, the Swahili obtained gold, slaves, ivory, and exotic local products such as tortoise shells and leopard skins, which they traded for pottery, glass, and textiles that Muslim merchants brought from Persia, India, and China. The rapidly increasing volume and value of trade had large repercussions for Swahili states and societies, just as such changes had for west African societies.

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, trade had brought tremendous wealth to coastal east Africa. By controlling and taxing trade within their jurisdictions, local chiefs strengthened their own authority and increased the influence of their communities. Gradually, trade concentrated at several coastal and island port cities that enjoyed sheltered or especially convenient locations: Mogadishu, Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Kilwa, Mozambique, and Sofala. Each of those sites developed into a powerful city-state governed by a king who supervised trade and organized public life in the region.

The cities themselves underwent an impressive transformation. Villages in the interior regions of east Africa had buildings made of wood and dried mud, the principal materials used even for prominent structures such as mosques. By about the twelfth century, however, Swahili peoples began to construct much larger buildings of coral, and by the fifteenth century the main Swahili towns boasted handsome stone mosques and public buildings. Meanwhile, the ruling elites and wealthy merchants of Swahili trading cities dressed in silk and fine cotton clothes, and they set their tables with porcelain imported from China.

Travelers' reports and recent archaeological discoveries have thrown especially clear light on the development of Kilwa, one of the busiest city-states on the east African coast. The earliest Bantu inhabitants of Kilwa relied mostly on fishing and engaged in a limited amount of trade between about 800 and 1000 C.E. During the next two centuries, they imported pottery and stoneware from other regions in east Africa and began to rely more on agriculture to support their growing numbers. By the early thirteenth century, Kilwans were prosperous enough to erect multistory stone buildings, and they used copper coins to facilitate economic transactions. Between 1300 and 1505, when Portuguese mariners subjected the city to a devastating sack, Kilwa enjoyed tremendous prosperity. The Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta visited the city in 1331 and reported that Muslim scholars from Arabia and Persia lived at Kilwa and consulted regularly with the local ruler.

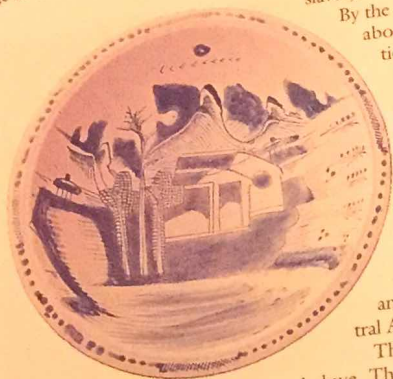
With a population of about twelve thousand, Kilwa was a thriving city with many stone buildings and mosques. Residents imported cotton and silk textiles as well as perfumes and pearls from India, and archaeologists have unearthed a staggering amount of Chinese porcelain. Merchants of Kilwa imported those products in exchange for gold,

The Swahili

The Swahili City-States

Kilwa

This fine piece of Chinese porcelain, probably produced in the fifteenth century, found its way into a Swahili tomb in modern Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.



Zimbabwe

slaves, and ivory obtained from interior regions. By the late fifteenth century, Kilwa exported about a ton of gold per year. Participation in Indian Ocean trade networks brought similar experiences to the other major Swahili cities. In fact, the influence of long-distance trade passed well beyond the coasts to the interior regions of east Africa. Villagers in the interior did not enjoy the sumptuous lifestyles of the Swahili elites, but trade and the wealth that it brought underwrote the establishment of large and powerful kingdoms in east and central Africa.

The best known of these kingdoms was Zimbabwe. The term *zimbabwe* refers simply to the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., the region occupied by the modern states of Zimbabwe and Mozambique featured many wooden residences known throughout the land as *zimbabwe*. By the ninth century, chiefs had begun to build their *zimbabwe* of stone—indicating an increasingly complex and well-organized society that could invest resources in expensive construction projects. About the early thirteenth century, a magnificent stone complex known as Great Zimbabwe began to arise near Nyanda in the modern state of Zimbabwe. Within stone walls 5 meters (16 feet) thick and 10 meters (32 feet) tall, Great Zimbabwe was a city of stone towers, palaces, and public buildings that served as the capital of a large kingdom situated between the Zambesi and Limpopo rivers. At the time of its greatest extent, during the late fifteenth century, up to eighteen thousand people may have lived in the vicinity of the stone complex at Great Zimbabwe, and the kingdom stretched from the outskirts of the Swahili city of Sofala deep into the interior of south-central Africa.

Kings residing at Great Zimbabwe controlled and taxed the trade between the interior and coastal regions. They organized the flow of gold, ivory, slaves, and local products from sources of supply to the coast. Their control over those products enabled them to forge alliances with local leaders and to profit handsomely from commercial transactions. Just as the trans-Saharan trade encouraged the building of states and empires in west Africa, the Indian Ocean trade generated wealth that financed the organization of city-states on the coast and large kingdoms in the interior regions of east and central Africa.

Islam in East Africa

In east Africa, again as in west Africa, trade brought cultural as well as political changes. Like their counterparts in west Africa, the ruling elites and the wealthy merchants of east Africa converted to the Islamic faith. They did not necessarily give up their religious and cultural traditions but, rather, continued to observe them for purposes of providing cultural leadership in their societies. By adopting Islam, however, they laid a cultural foundation for close cooperation with Muslim merchants trading in the Indian Ocean basin. Moreover, Islam served as a fresh source of legitimacy for their rule, since they gained recognition from Islamic states in southwest Asia, and their conversion opened the door to political alliances with Muslim rulers in other lands. Even though the conversion of elite classes did not bring about the immediate spread of Islam throughout their societies, it enabled Islam to establish a presence in east Africa under the sponsorship of some particularly influential patrons. The faith eventually attracted

Sources from the Past

Ibn Battuta on Muslim Society at Mogadishu

During the fourteenth century the Moroccan jurist Ibn Battuta traveled throughout much of the eastern hemisphere. Twice he visited sub-Saharan Africa: in 1331, when he traveled along the Swahili coast, and in 1351–1352, when he visited the Mali empire. His account of his visit to the Swahili city of Mogadishu offers insight into the mercantile and social customs of the city as well as the hospitality accorded to distinguished visitors.

[Mogadishu] is a town of enormous size. Its inhabitants are merchants possessed of vast resources: they own large numbers of camels, of which they slaughter hundreds every day [for food], and also have quantities of sheep. In this place are manufactured the woven fabrics called after it, which are unequalled and exported from it to Egypt and elsewhere. It is the custom of the people of this town that, when a vessel reaches the anchorage, the *sumbug*, which are small boats, come out to it. In each *sumbug* there are a number of young men of the town, each one of whom brings a covered platter containing food and presents it to one of the merchants on the ship saying "This is my guest," and each of the others does the same. The merchant, on disembarking, goes only to the house of his host among the young men, except those of them who have made frequent journeys to the town and have gained some acquaintance with its inhabitants; these lodge where they please. When he takes up residence with his host, the latter sells his goods for him and buys for him; and if anyone buys anything from him at too low a price or sells to him in the absence of his host, that sale is held invalid by them. This practice is a profitable one for them.

When the young men came on board the vessel in which I was, one of them came up to me. My companions said to him "This man is not a merchant, but a doctor of the law," whereupon he called out to his friends and said to them "This is the guest of the qadi." There was among them one of the qadi's men, who informed him of this, and he came down to the beach with a number of students and sent one of them to me. I then disembarked with my companions and saluted him and his party. He said to me "In the name of God, let us go to salute the Shaikh." "And who is the Shaikh?" I said, and he answered, "The Sultan," for it is their custom to call the sultan "the Shaikh."

When I arrived with the qadi . . . at the sultan's residence, one of the serving-boys came out and saluted the qadi, who said to him "Take word to the intendant's office and inform the Shaikh that this man has come from the land of al-Hijaz [Arabia]." So he took the message, then returned bringing a plate on which were some leaves of betel and areca nuts, the same to the qadi, and what was left on the plate to my companions and the qadi's students. He brought also a jug of rose-water of Damascus, which he poured over me and over the qadi [i.e., over our hands], and said "Our master commands that he be lodged in the students' house," this being a building equipped for the entertainment of students of religion. . . .

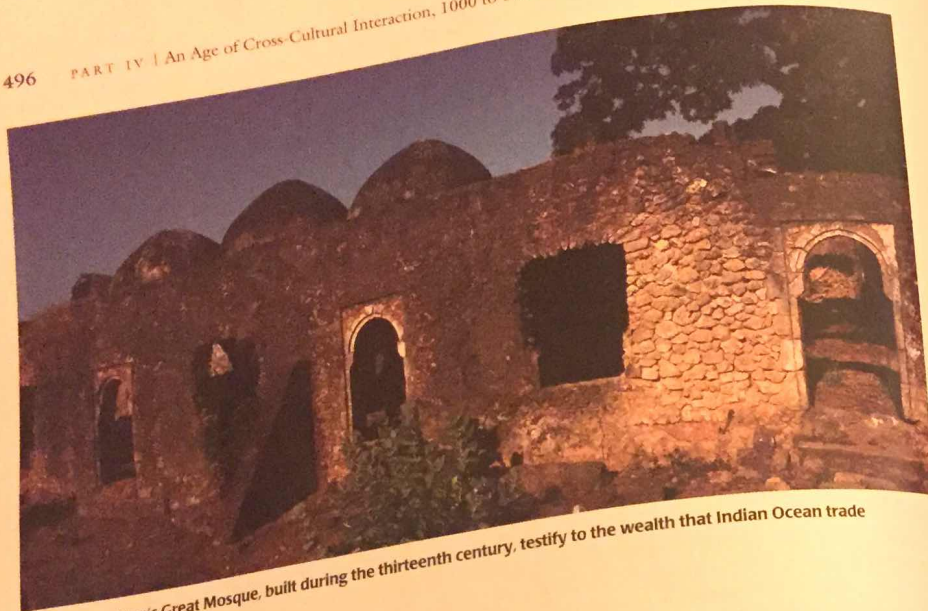
We stayed there three days, food being brought to us three times a day, following their custom. On the fourth day, which was a Friday, the qadi and students and one of the Shaikh's viziers came to me, bringing a set of robes; these [official] robes of theirs consist of a silk wrapper which one ties round his waist in place of drawers (for they have no acquaintance with these), a tunic of Egyptian linen with an embroidered border, a furred mantle of Jerusalem stuff, and an Egyptian turban with an embroidered edge. They also brought robes for my companions suitable to their position. We went to the congregational mosque and made our prayers behind the *maqsura* [private box for the sultan]. When the Shaikh came out of the door of the *maqsura* I saluted him along with the qadi; he said a word of greeting, spoke in their tongue with the qadi, and then said in Arabic "You are heartily welcome, and you have honored our land and given us pleasure."

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

From Ibn Battuta's report, how could you characterize the role of hospitality on the Swahili coast?

SOURCE: H. A. R. Gibb, trans. *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325–1354*, 4 vols. Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1958–94, 2:374–77.

496 PART IV | An Age of Cross-Cultural Interaction, 1000 to 1500 C.E.



Ruins of Kilwa's Great Mosque, built during the thirteenth century, testify to the wealth that Indian Ocean trade brought to the city.

interest in larger circles and became one of the principal cultural and religious traditions of east Africa.

African Society and Cultural Development

By the eleventh century C.E., Africa was a land of enormous diversity. The peoples of sub-Saharan Africa spoke some eight hundred different languages, and the continent supported a wide variety of societies and economies: mobile bands of hunting and gathering peoples, fishing peoples who lived alongside the continent's lakes and coasts, nomadic herders, subsistence farmers who migrated periodically to fresh lands, settled cultivators, and city-based societies that drew their livelihoods from mining, manufacturing, and trade. Although this diversity makes it difficult to speak of African society and cultural development in general terms, certain social forms and cultural patterns appeared widely throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Social Classes

In kingdoms, empires, and city-states, such as Kongo, Mali, and Kilwa, respectively, African peoples developed complex societies with clearly defined classes: ruling elites, military nobles, administrative officials, religious authorities, wealthy merchants, artisans, business entrepreneurs, common people, peasants, and slaves. These societies more or less resembled those found in other settled, agricultural lands of Eurasia or organized by powerful states.



An illustration from a seventeenth-century missionary account shows an African blacksmith (seated at right) working at his forge while an attendant (seated at left) uses a bellows to pump air into the furnace.

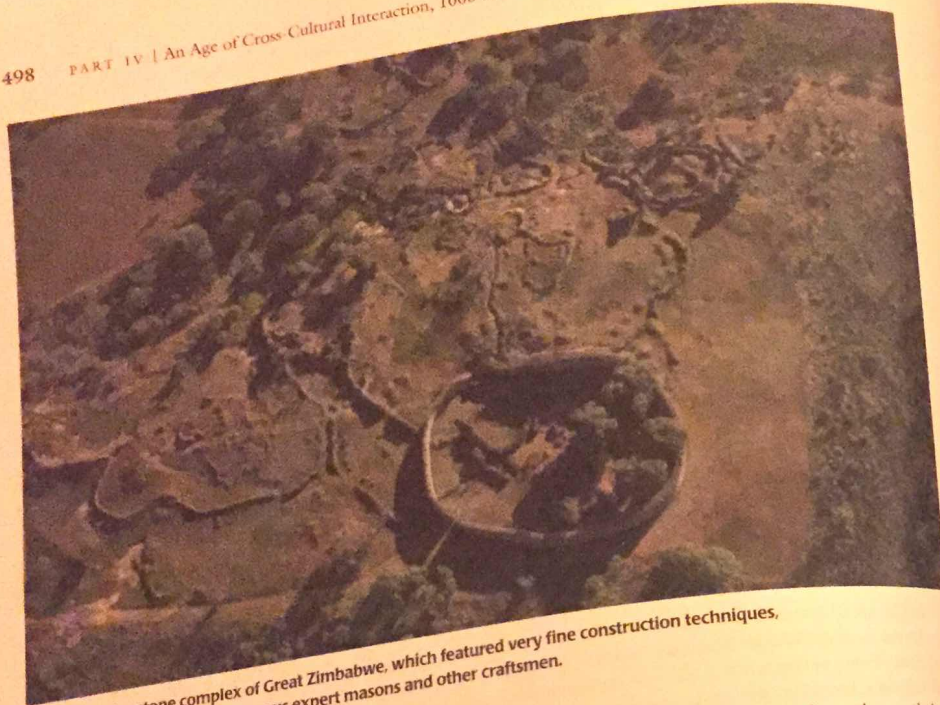
In the small states and kin-based societies of sub-Saharan Africa, however, social structures were different. Small states often generated an aristocratic or ruling elite, and they always recognized a class of religious authorities. Outside the larger states and empires, however, generally speaking, kinship, sex and gender expectations, and age groupings were the principal considerations that determined social position in sub-Saharan Africa.

Extended families and clans served as the main foundation of social and economic organization in small-scale agricultural societies. Unlike most societies in north Africa and Eurasia, the institution of privately owned property did not exist in sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, communities claimed rights to land and used it in common. The villages of sub-Saharan Africa, where most of the population lived, generally consisted of several extended family groups. Male heads of families jointly governed the village and organized the work of their own groups. They allocated portions of the communal lands for their relatives to cultivate and were responsible for distributing harvests equitably among all members of their groups. Thus most villagers functioned in society first as members of a family or a clan.

Sex and gender relations also influenced the roles individuals played in society. Sex largely determined work roles. Workers with special skills were mostly men. Leather tanning, for example, was the work of men who carefully guarded knowledge of their techniques and tanning compounds, which they passed down to their heirs. Iron working was a highly prestigious skill in many African societies because blacksmiths knew the secrets of turning ores into useful objects such as knives, hoes, spearheads, and swords. Blacksmiths often served as community leaders, and like leather tanners, they passed knowledge of their craft down to their heirs. Women in blacksmith families often served as potters for their communities. They too enjoyed

Kinship Groups

Sex and Gender Relations



The massive stone complex of Great Zimbabwe, which featured very fine construction techniques, required the services of numerous expert masons and other craftsmen.

Women's Roles

special prestige because of their ability to transform ingredients from the earth into useful pottery vessels. Men usually undertook the heavy labor of clearing land and preparing it for cultivation. Both men and women participated in the planting and harvesting of crops, and women also tended to domestic chores and took primary responsibility for child rearing.

As in other societies, men largely monopolized public authority. Yet women in sub-Saharan Africa generally had more opportunities open to them than did their counterparts in other lands. Women enjoyed high honor as the sources of life. On at least a few occasions, women made their way to positions of power, and aristocratic women often influenced public affairs by virtue of their prominence within their families. Women merchants commonly traded at markets, and they participated actively in both local and long-distance trade in Africa. Sometimes women even engaged in combat and organized all-female military units.

The arrival of Islam did not change the status of women in sub-Saharan Africa as dramatically as it did in Arabia and southwest Asia. South of the Sahara, early converts to Islam came mostly from the ranks of the ruling elites and the merchant classes. Because it did not become a popular faith for several centuries after its introduction, Islam did not deeply influence the customs of most Africans. Even at royal courts where Islam attracted eager converts, Muslims of sub-Saharan Africa simply did not honor the same social codes as their counterparts in Arabia, southwest Asia, and north

Africa. In a few societies upper-class Muslim women wore veils and led secluded lives. For the most part, however, Muslim women in sub-Saharan Africa socialized freely with men outside their immediate families, and they continued to appear and work openly in society in ways not permitted to women in other Islamic lands. Thus Islam did relatively little to curtail the opportunities available to women or to compromise their status in sub-Saharan Africa.

Apart from kinship and expectations based on sex and gender roles, African society also made a place for age groups that included all individuals within a given community born within a few years of one another. Historical linguistic analysis suggests that the recognition of those age grades, or age sets, arose in the early days of agricultural society in the Sudan, and it is clear that in many African societies the practice of grouping individuals into age grades has continued into recent times. Members of age grades performed tasks appropriate for their level of development, and they often bonded with one another to form tight circles of friends and political allies. Members of an age grade might provide labor for community projects, for example, or take joint responsibility for looking after village elders. They aided members who experienced adversities and helped one another at crucial junctures, such as marriage and the building of a new household. Thus age grades had the effect of establishing social ties that crossed the lines of family and kinship.

One class of individuals stood apart from the other social groups: slaves. As in other lands, the institution of slavery had a place in Africa since remote antiquity. Most slaves were captives of war. Others came from the ranks of debtors, suspected witches, and criminals. Within Africa most slaves probably worked as agricultural laborers, although many also worked as construction laborers, miners, or porters.

Slaves were an important form of personal wealth in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the absence of private property prevented people from becoming wealthy through the accumulation of landholdings, the accumulation of slaves enabled individuals or families to increase their agricultural production and also to enhance their positions in society. Thus slave trading and slave holding were prominent features of sub-Saharan African society.

After about the ninth century C.E., the expansion of the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trade networks stimulated increased traffic in African slaves. Muslim merchants provided access to markets in India, Persia, southwest Asia, and the Mediterranean basin, where the demand for slaves outstripped the supply available from eastern Europe, previously the main source of slaves. As a result, merchants from northern lands traded in sub-Saharan Africa not only for gold, ivory, and exotic local products but also for slaves.

In response to that demand, slave raiding became an increasingly prominent activity within Africa itself. Rulers of large-scale states and empires began to make war on smaller states and kin-based societies, which could not defend themselves effectively against better-organized neighbors, in search of captives destined for northern slave markets. In some years, ten thousand to twenty thousand Africans left their homes as slaves. During the mid-fourteenth century, the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara desert in a caravan that included six hundred slaves bound for north Africa and the Mediterranean basin. Mansa Musa of Mali set out on his pilgrimage to Mecca with five hundred slaves, many of whom he distributed along the way as gifts to his hosts. Other slaves departed from the coastal cities of east Africa for destinations in Persia and India.

Records of this slave trade are scarce, but a lengthy uprising known as the Zanj revolt throws light on the nature of African slavery in Muslim lands. The term *Zanj*

Age Grades

Slavery

Slave Trading

The Zanj Revolt

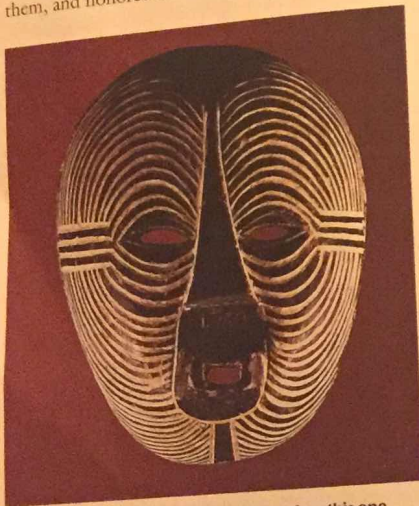
referred to black slaves from the Swahili coast. At least by the seventh century C.E., many Zanj slaves labored under extremely difficult conditions in southern Mesopotamia, where they worked on sugarcane plantations or cleared land of salt deposits to prepare it for cultivation. On several occasions they mounted revolts, which Muslim authorities promptly snuffed. Following a series of riots, in about 869 a rebel slave named Ali bin Muhammad organized about fifteen thousand Zanj slaves into an immense force that captured Basra, the most important city of southern Mesopotamia, and even established a rebel state in the region. Distracted by other threats, the Abbasid rulers of Mesopotamia turned their full attention to the rebellion only in 879, a full decade after it had begun. By 883 they had crushed the revolt, killed Ali bin Muhammad, and executed the other rebel leaders. Despite its ultimate collapse, the fourteen-year Zanj revolt clearly demonstrated that African slavery was a prominent feature of Muslim society.

Though smaller than the Atlantic slave trade of modern times, the Islamic slave trade was a sizable affair: between 750 and 1500 C.E. the number of African slaves transported to foreign lands may have exceeded ten million. The high demand led to the creation of networks within Africa that supplied slaves and served as a foundation for the Atlantic slave trade in later centuries.

African Religion

Peoples of sub-Saharan Africa developed a wide range of languages, societies, and cultural traditions. Religious beliefs and practices in particular took many forms. The continent's peoples referred to their deities by different names, told different stories about them, and honored them with different rituals. Yet certain features were common to many religions of sub-Saharan Africa. In combination, those features offer considerable insight into the cultural and religious climate of sub-Saharan Africa in premodern times.

Many African peoples had held monotheistic beliefs from the early days of Sudanic agriculture. Their beliefs did not persist unchanged through the centuries. On the contrary, they underwent considerable development as individual peoples learned about deities honored in other societies or as they sought their own improved understandings of the gods and their roles in the world. Nevertheless, many peoples recognized a single divine force or male god as the agent responsible for setting the world in motion and providing it with order. Some peoples believed that this god also sustained the world,



Creator God

Entrancing and enthralling masks such as this one from Congo were essential to the proper observance of religious rituals, which often involved communicating with natural or animal spirits. Masks transformed diviners and provided them with powers not accessible to normal humans.

intervening indirectly, through spirits, to influence the course of human affairs. Some considered this deity to be all-powerful, others regarded him as all-knowing, and many considered him both omnipotent and omniscient.

Apart from the superior creator god, Africans recognized many lesser gods and spirits often associated with the sun, wind, rain, trees, rivers, and other natural features. Unlike the creator god, these lesser deities participated actively in the workings of the world. They could confer or withhold benefits and bring favor or injury to humans. Similarly, most Africans believed that the souls of departed ancestors had the power to intervene in the lives and experiences of their descendants: the departed could shape events to the advantage of descendants who behaved properly and honored their ancestors and bring misfortune as punishment for evil behavior and neglect of their ancestors' memory. Much of the ritual of African religions focused on honoring deities, spirits, or ancestors' souls to win their favor or regain their goodwill. The rituals included prayers, animal sacrifices, and ceremonies marking important stages of life—such as birth, circumcision, marriage, and death.

Like other peoples of the world, Africans recognized classes of religious specialists—individuals who by virtue of their innate abilities or extensive training had the power to mediate between humanity and supernatural beings. Often referred to as diviners, they were intelligent people, usually men though sometimes women as well, who understood clearly the networks of political, social, economic, and psychological relationships within their communities. When afflicted by illness, sterility, crop failure, or some other disaster, individuals or groups consulted diviners to learn the cause of their misfortune. Diviners then consulted oracles, identified the causes of the trouble, and prescribed medicine, rituals, or sacrifices designed to eliminate the problem and bring about a return to normality.

For the most part, African religion concerned itself not with matters of theology but, rather, with the more practical business of explaining, predicting, and controlling the experiences of individuals and groups in the world. Thus African religion strongly emphasized morality and proper behavior as essential to the maintenance of an orderly world. Failure to observe high moral standards would lead to disorder, which would displease deities, spirits, and departed ancestors and ensure that misfortune befall the negligent parties. Because proper moral behavior was so important to their fortunes, family and kinship groups took responsibility for policing their members and disciplining those who fell short of expected standards.

The Arrival of Christianity and Islam

Alongside religions that concentrated on the practical matter of maintaining an orderly world, two religions of salvation won converts in sub-Saharan Africa—Christianity and Islam. Both arrived in Africa as foreign faiths introduced by foreign peoples, and in time the sub-Saharan adherents adapted both faiths to the needs and interests of their societies.

Christianity reached Egypt and north Africa during the first century C.E., soon after the faith's appearance, as it attracted converts throughout the Mediterranean basin. Alexandria in Egypt became one of the most prominent centers of early Christian thought, and north Africa was the home of St. Augustine, among many other leaders of the fledgling church. Yet for several centuries Christianity remained a Mediterranean faith whose appeal did not reach sub-Saharan Africa.

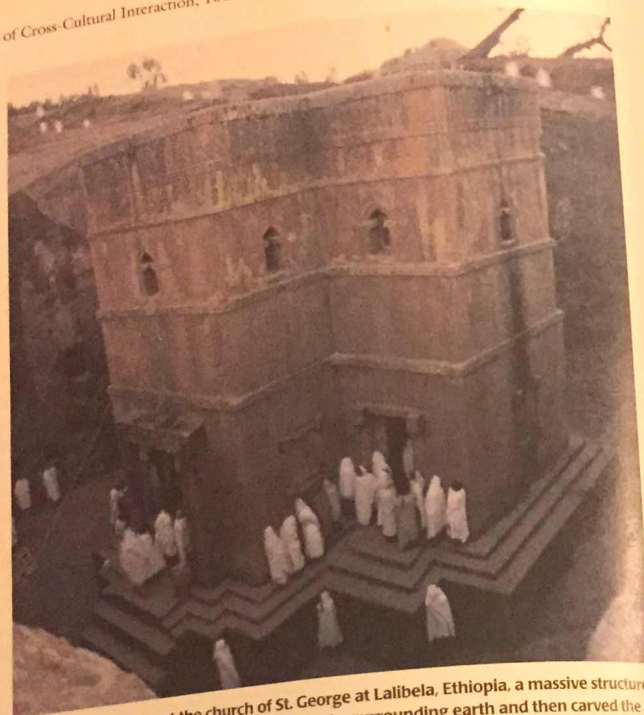
About the middle of the fourth century C.E., Christianity established a foothold in the kingdom of Axum, located in the highlands of modern Ethiopia. The first Axumite converts were probably local merchants who traded with Mediterranean Christians

Lesser Gods and Spirits

Diviners

Early Christianity in North Africa

The Christian Kingdom of Axum



Worshippers gather at the church of St. George at Lalibela, Ethiopia, a massive structure in the form of a cross. Workers excavated the surrounding earth and then carved the church itself out of a rock.

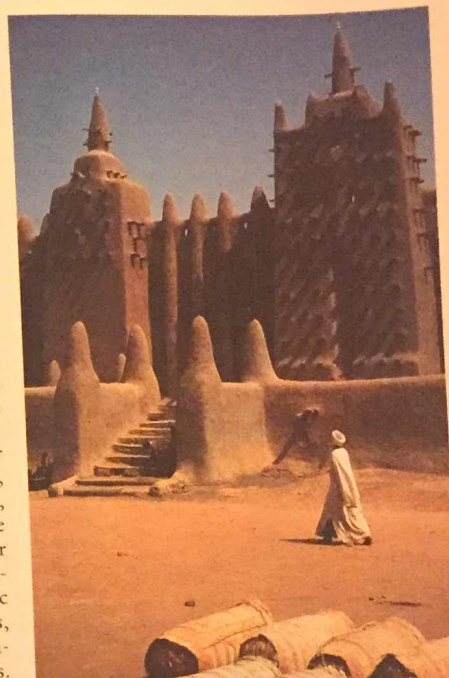
calling at the port of Adulis on the Red Sea. As missionaries visited Ethiopia, the kings of Axum also converted to Christianity, possibly in hopes of improving relations with their powerful neighbors to the north in Christian Egypt. Indeed, the kings of Axum were some of the first royal converts to Christianity, adopting the faith shortly after the Roman emperor Constantine himself. Missionaries later established monasteries, translated the Bible into the Ethiopian language, and worked to popularize Christianity throughout the kingdom.

The fortunes of Christianity in Ethiopia reflected the larger political experience of the region. In the late seventh century C.E., the ruling house of Axum fell into decline, and during the next several centuries the expansion of Islam left an isolated island of Christianity in the Ethiopian highlands. During the twelfth century, however, a new ruling dynasty undertook a centralizing campaign and enthusiastically promoted Christianity as a faith that could provide cultural unity for the land. From the twelfth through the sixteenth century, Christianity enjoyed particular favor in Ethiopia. During the twelfth century, the Ethiopian kings ordered the carving of eleven massive churches out of solid rock—a monumental work of construction that required enormous re-

sources and untold hours of labor. During the thirteenth century, rulers of Ethiopia's Solomonic dynasty claimed descent from the Israelite kings David and Solomon in an effort to lend additional biblical luster to their authority. The fictional work *Kebra Negast* (*The Glory of Kings*), which undertook to trace that lineage, has recently become popular among Rastafarians and devotees of reggae music in Ethiopia, Jamaica, and other lands as well. Meanwhile, Christianity retained its privileged status in Ethiopia until it fell out of favor following the socialist revolution of 1974.

During the centuries after the Islamic conquests of Egypt, the Sudan, and northern Africa, Ethiopian Christians had little contact with Christians in other lands. As a result, although Ethiopian Christianity retained basic Christian theology and rituals, it increasingly reflected the interests of its African devotees. Ethiopian Christians believed that a large host of evil spirits populated the world, for example, and they carried amulets or charms for protection against these menacing spirits. The twelfth-century carved-rock churches themselves harked back to pre-Christian values, since rock shrines had been a prominent feature in Ethiopian religion from the second or perhaps even third millennium B.C.E. The rock churches absorbed that tradition into Ethiopian Christianity. Not until the sixteenth century, when Portuguese mariners began to visit Ethiopia en route to India, did Ethiopians reestablish relations with Christians from other lands. By that time the Portuguese had introduced their Roman Catholic faith to the kingdom of Kongo, and Christianity had begun to win a place for itself elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Meanwhile, Islam appealed strongly to ruling elites and merchants in sub-Saharan west Africa and coastal east Africa because it served as a cultural foundation for their business relationships with Muslim merchants from north Africa and southwest Asia. Nonetheless, African ruling elites and merchants did not convert to Islam purely for mercenary reasons. On the contrary, the converts often took their new faith seriously. They built mosques, founded religious schools, invited experts in Islamic law into their lands, and displayed real enthusiasm for their adopted faith. Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca and his support of Islam in Mali represented a devotion to Islam shared by untold numbers of sub-Saharan Muslims.



The magnificent mosque at Jenne, constructed in the fourteenth century, served as a principal center of Islamic education and scholarship in the Mali empire.

Ethiopian Christianity

African Islam

Islam and
African Society

Like Christianity, Islam in sub-Saharan Africa reflected the interests of local converts. Thus, as in India, southeast Asia, and other lands, Islam in sub-Saharan Africa made a place for the inherited traditions and beliefs of sub-Saharan Muslims. Africans who converted to Islam continued to take protective measures against the workings of evil spirits and witches, for example, and to participate in rituals designed to please nature deities and the spirits of departed ancestors.

Islam also had to accommodate African notions of proper relations between the sexes. When Ibn Battuta visited Mali in the mid-fourteenth century, he took deep offense at casual conversations that women had with men other than their husbands, and he became especially incensed when he observed women going about in public, even at the imperial court, dressed only in loincloths. Yet his hosts, even those who considered themselves pious Muslims, paid no heed to women in Islamic society.

Indeed, during the early centuries after its introduction to the region, Islam supplemented rather than replaced the traditional religions of sub-Saharan Africa. West African merchants sometimes adopted Islam when they engaged actively in trade, since a common faith facilitated their dealings with Muslim merchants from other lands, but returned to their inherited traditions when they turned from mercantile to other pursuits. And ruling elites routinely continued to honor inherited religious traditions, which provided powerful sanctions for their rule, long after adopting Islam for the various advantages that it made available to them.

States and societies of sub-Saharan Africa differed considerably from those in other parts of the eastern hemisphere. The foundations of most sub-Saharan societies were the agricultural economy and iron-working skills that Bantu and other peoples spread throughout most of the African continent. As these peoples migrated to new regions and established new communities, they usually based their societies on kin groups rather than the state structures that predominated elsewhere in the eastern hemisphere. When different societies came into conflict with one another, however, they increasingly established formal political authorities to guide their affairs. African peoples organized states of various sizes, some very small and others quite large. When they entered into commercial relationships with Muslim peoples in southwest Asia and north Africa, they also built formidable imperial states in west Africa and bustling city-states in coastal east Africa. These states had far-reaching implications for sub-Saharan societies because they depended on a regular and reliable flow of trade goods—particularly gold, ivory, and slaves—and they encouraged African peoples to organize themselves politically and economically to satisfy the demands of foreign Muslim merchants. Trade also had cultural implications because it facilitated the introduction of Islam, which together with native African traditions profoundly influenced the development of sub-Saharan societies. After the eighth century, ruling elites in both west Africa and coastal east Africa mostly accepted Islam and strengthened its position in their societies by building mosques, consulting Muslim advisors, and supporting Islamic schools. By 1500 C.E. African traditions and Islamic influences had combined to fashion a series of powerful, productive, and distinctive societies in sub-Saharan Africa.

CHRONOLOGY

4th century C.E.	Introduction of bananas to Africa
11th to 13th century	Kingdom of Ghana
11th to 15th century	Swahili cities
12th to 15th century	Kingdom of Great Zimbabwe
12th to 16th century	Christian kingdom of Axum
13th to 15th century	Mali empire
1230–1255	Reign of Sundiata
14th to 17th century	Kingdom of Kongo
1312–1337	Reign of Mansa Musa
1324–1325	Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca

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