

FOCAL
POINTS

During the postclassical period, Africa participated actively in the expansion of civilization and in new contacts with the developing world network. Why were key parts of Africa important trading partners for societies elsewhere? Why was Islam attractive to many Africans, but what were the limits to its impact south of the Sahara? Is it possible, despite great variety, to speak of some basic characteristics of African civilization as it took shape in the postclassical period?

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AND THE WORLD NETWORK

Islam's sweep across North Africa effectively joined this region to the Middle East in a single, if sometimes politically fragmented, civilization. Below the Sahara desert, Islam also gained important influence, although as in southern Asia, it competed with other beliefs. Sub-Saharan Africa remained an area of independent civilization, even as it participated in the radiation of religion, commerce, and politics from Islam. A distinct set of African identities persisted. At the same time, portions of sub-Saharan Africa borrowed more than India from Islam, importing not only religion but also Arabic writing. Parts of the African economy were more closely tied to the Arab world than was true in India, as Africans sent gold, raw materials, and slaves in return for horses and some luxury craft items. Africa, in this sense, imitated the more established centers of civilization, as did Russia, Japan, and Western Europe during this same postclassical period.

Because of its diverse sources and the vast territory involved, sub-Saharan African history, before the modern centuries, is not easy to grasp. Since most African societies did not develop writing, the historical record is sparse, gleaned from accounts of non-African travelers (notably the Muslims), archeological remains, and the fantastic stories and family histories that many African peoples transmitted by word of mouth. Technology, although benefiting from the extensive use of iron—introduced below the Sahara by 1000 B.C.E.—lagged behind Asian standards. Animal diseases, including the dreaded tse-tse fly, limited livestock and animal transportation.

Although political organization allowed monarchies in many parts of Africa—emerging at about the same time and in some of the same ways that monarchies arose in Western Europe—there were more African societies without formal politics beyond villages and tribes than was the case in Asia and Europe.

Furthermore, African societies were diverse. The continent, even below the Sahara, is vast. It includes huge deserts—like the southern Sahara and, in the south, the Kalihari; extensive mountains in the east; grasslands below the Sahara and again in the south; and the dense tropical jungle in the center. Large African empires developed but none ever embraced more than a fraction of the sub-Saharan region. Fragmentation produced considerable diversity. No religion has ever swept over the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, nor has any language provided unified communication.

However, diversity was not absolute. Although there are over 1000 languages in use in sub-Saharan Africa, they derive from no more than four or five basic tongues, which means that many of the languages are closely related to one another. While political unity was never achieved, there were some recurring political trends in many parts of the continent. Although a single religion never flourished, a strong polytheistic leaning resulted in some basic common ground where the African religious experience was concerned. Similarities of this sort, while they cannot be pressed too far, allow for some discussion of certain tendencies in African civilization—tendencies that reached fuller expression when civilization itself began to spread widely, although not universally, from about the year 600 C.E.

The impetus for this spreading civilization was twofold. First, familiar enough from the example of other early civilizations, was the sheer passage of time. Civilization had flourished in the northeast for over a millennium. Agriculture had been well entrenched in the northern and western regions of sub-Saharan Africa even longer. It had not, by 500 C.E., reached into or through the equatorial jungles, where small hunting and gathering groups persisted. Thus, the southern part of the continent, ultimately a fertile agricultural region, remained untouched. But in the north and west, long centuries of agriculture had provided a solid economic base. Iron-working was also well established. Village organization was tightly knit, and the local communities, along with firm ties among kinship or extended family groups, provided a durable political base for further cultural achievements. In some African societies, the stable local units and tight links among family members sufficed to ensure order. Family or lineage bonds were a distinctive feature, and Africans devoted great attention to memorizing elaborate family trees so that relatives could be identified even in fairly distant regions. In many kinship groups, or clans, certain vocations were inherited, like the work of traders, peasants, political officials, even slaves. The importance of clans explains the often unstructured quality of African government.

Finally, religion, although varying widely in specific local forms, gave Africans an explanation of the workings of nature, including rites and beliefs to deal with illness and natural disasters, and also a firm sense of their own identity. Each clan had its own sacred animal that expressed a divine spirit and could not be killed by clan members. Because most African religions included both the worship of spirits in nature and a veneration of ancestors, they served a social as well as mystical function.

In sum, the first context for expanding civilization in Africa was the solid foundation formed by an agricultural economy many centuries old and a supportive reli-

gious and political culture. Stronger kingdoms, like Ghana in West Africa, began to emerge as early as 300 C.E. on these bases.

The second stimulus for the spread of civilization resulted from trading contacts that developed between the seventh and the tenth centuries. New levels of international exchange established two principal channels. On Africa's east coast, Islamic sailors from southern Arabia set up urban centers. Trade to and from these centers, across the Indian Ocean, became extensive. Ivory and gold, plus some slaves, were exported to the Middle East, India, and even China, in return for manufactured products including Chinese porcelain. Although this commerce remained largely in non-African hands, the Arab traders settled in the east African cities, intermarried extensively, and provided the foundation for a number of city-states and local kingdoms. They even developed a language, Swahili, that combined Arab and African features to promote wider communication. East African cities did not have extensive contacts with the interior, which limited their impact in Africa, but they were also a noteworthy development.

More significant was the second trade channel, across the Sahara from Muslim North Africa. Here, caravans traveled, by camel and by foot, on arduous journeys. Although the domestication of camels occurred earlier, widespread African use of camels began about 200 C.E. and revolutionized trading opportunities. By 700, Muslim traders were seeking gold, ivory, salt, and some slaves from sub-Saharan Africa. They also traded for the cola nut, a stimulant not mentioned in the Quran and therefore permitted to the faithful. The wealth that resulted permitted the development of thriving African cities. Timbuktu, in the southern Sahara, was the greatest center, boasting a large military force, a huge treasury, and—in the words of an early European visitor—"many magistrates, learned doctors, and men of religion." Here was a stimulus to growing trade, the manufacture of cloth and precious metals, and new social and political patterns in a wide stretch of Africa below the Sahara. African merchants expanded their operations through many parts of West Africa. Social divisions began to form, between rich and poor, between soldiers, artisans, and farmers, some of which cut across traditional kinship lines.

Africa was thus part of the Islamic orbit and a growing participant in international trade. It was also one of the first societies to imitate other civilizations, using its trade contacts and selective borrowings from Islam to accelerate aspects of its historical development. The postclassical period saw distinctive characteristics persist in Africa, but also the increasing influence of larger world trends.

THE GREAT KINGDOMS

Not surprisingly, the first great African kingdoms—not counting the states in the upper Nile—arose in the region of the southern Sahara and the grasslands below. This area is called the Sudan, from the Arab word for black; in these centuries, however, it stretched all along the southern Sahara rather than the upper Nile nation that is now called the Sudan. The Sudanese kingdoms exacted some tribute from merchants, which provided considerable wealth without the extensive taxation of the peasant class.

Ghana was the earliest of a series of Sudanic kingdoms. Its origins extended to the classical period, but its clearer development from about 800 related to the growth of cross-Saharan trade and the expansion of salt and gold mining in the region. The kingdom, built around several cities that have since vanished, served as a crossroads between North Africa and the gold and ivory producers of the grassland and forest areas to the south. Kings of Ghana imposed taxes on the trade that crossed their region. According to one Arab writer, "All pieces of gold that are found in this empire belong to the king." This monopoly carefully protected against the unauthorized production of gold that might flood the market and supplemented the direct tax (also to be paid in gold) levied on every donkey or camel bearing salt. With these resources, the Ghanese king sustained a lavish court, offering banquets to thousands of guests and surrounding himself with luxurious trappings. Ceremony and ritual helped the king express his power; so did the related belief that the king was in some sense divine, descended from and protected by the gods. The features of divine kingship, as it has been called, became common in African political organization during this period and beyond.

Ghana developed a complex relationship with the Islamic world. Its kings hired Arabs to keep records, which helped them develop the bureaucracy necessary for the expansion of the state. Trade with Islamic North Africa was needed not only for tax revenues, but also as a source for horses, on which military activities, notably the cavalry, depended (local horse breeding was limited by the presence of the tse-tse fly). The cavalry allowed the state to expand into the plains of the Sudan, to exact tribute and acquire slaves. However, these contacts with Islam and a growing dependence on trade also made Ghana vulnerable to nomadic raiders and invasions from states to the north. The kingdom's wealth inevitably drew attention from North Africa, while local Islamic residents may have invited the presence of fellow Muslims. The kingdom of Ghana, always loosely organized through alliances between king and local leaders, lacked the ability to survive this situation. Although its wealth was great, Ghana's defense depended on arrangements with local military groups, rather than professional soldiers. And, the kingdom maintained only a rudimentary bureaucracy, understandably focused on tax collection. Weakened by military raids from outside its borders, the kingdom collapsed around 1200.

A number of other kingdoms had already formed in the Sudan region, some of them organized with councils as well as kings. Copper production and textiles flourished in several of these kingdoms, a few of which endured into the nineteenth century. A number of African trading companies developed, sometimes organized along hereditary lines so that their administration remained within the same extended family across generations. Some of these companies, too, survived into present times. Thriving market centers assumed a major place in the life of West Africa, in portions of contemporary nations such as Nigeria.

The clearest successor state to Ghana, however, emerged during the thirteenth century. Its regional basis was slightly different from that of Ghana, and its political organization was better developed. It too, however, relied on cavalry, trade, and contact with Islam. The kingdom of Mali was established under the leadership of an able general named Sundiata, who defeated a number of smaller states and ruled for about a quarter century until his death in 1260. Sundiata's state rested on the wealth derived from trade with North Africa, and also on the unusual fertility of the Gambia

river valley, where rice and several other crops thrived. Sundiata and his successors were regarded as divine monarchs, similar to the situation in Ghana, where a ruler's religious authority and magical power were emphasized. They also formed alliances with a variety of local leaders. But, Sundiata converted to Islam, partly as a gesture of goodwill toward his North African trading partners. Although he did not force Islam on his subjects, he and his successors employed Islamic bureaucrats and popularized the use of Arabic script. As a religion of the elite, Islam provided a sense of coherence and also skills in law and writing that allowed the development of a more extensive bureaucracy and legal system than had prevailed in Ghana.

The rulers of Mali also accrued great wealth. One successor to Sundiata, Mansa Musa, making a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1334-35, dazzled Egyptians and other Arabs with the gold and ornaments of his entourage. His staff loaded 90 camels with gold dust, each load weighing 300 pounds, to provide spending money for the trip. Several thousand subjects accompanied Mansa Musa on the pilgrimage. He himself offered substantial gifts to people he met along the way and to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Not surprisingly, his reputation spread widely. (Also not surprisingly, he ran out of gold and had to borrow in Egypt; the size of the loan, quickly repaid, threw Egyptian banks into some confusion.) A French map, some decades later, recalled Mansa Musa's name, adding provocatively that "so abundant is the gold that is found in his land that he is the richest and most noble king of all the area." But, Mansa Musa was more than a big-spending pilgrim. He organized a pool of many Muslim scholars, from as far away as Egypt, in his capital city; his government engaged in diplomacy, including the exchange of ambassadors, with other North African countries and possibly other even more distant nations.

Mali became one of the great nations of the Islamic world, extending from the Atlantic deep into the interior of the Sudan. Mali emperors promoted active trade and also patronized Islamic learning; Timbuktu became a major center of Islamic scholarship, where books, it was said, were valued above gold. Laws were strictly enforced, and the empire enjoyed a long period of peace and prosperity. The great trading families extended their commercial skills. An Arab visitor noted, "Neither the man who travels nor he who stays at home has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence."

Mali began to decline, however, by about 1400. Its place was taken by a third great Sudanese kingdom, Songhai, which flourished from the late fifteenth century to 1591. Songhai, although somewhat smaller than Mali, continued the development of a civil service to supplement the personal authority of the king. This state, too, was Islamic, though again, most of the inhabitants remained true to their polytheistic traditions, and in the freedom granted women, especially in public, and in other respects, it greatly offended Islamic purists. Rather than depending on alliances with local lords, the kings of Songhai built armies that owed loyalty only to them; some of their soldiers were slaves, the personal possessions of the monarchy. Many new territories were gained by conquest. The kingdom of Songhai collapsed only as a result of new attacks from North Africa, notably from the kingdom of Morocco, and internal rebellion. With its downfall, the great period of the Sudanic kingdoms came to an end, although in fact a variety of new kingdoms formed in subsequent centuries until, in the nineteenth century, the full onslaught of European imperialism interrupted this internal political development.