

## Chapter 13

### *African Civilizations and the Spread of Islam*

#### OUTLINE

##### I. Introduction

Islam influenced sub-Saharan African culture without incorporating African states into a Middle Eastern core. During much of the classical period, links between sub-Saharan Africa and the civilized cores were limited. Between 800 C.E. and 1500 C.E., contacts between Africa and other civilizations intensified. One of the most important of the cultural influences was the conversion of some African states to Islam. Islamization connected Africa more closely to a Eurasian system of trade and exposed the emerging states of Africa to new concepts of religion, commerce, and political organization. State-building in Africa differed from region to region, with rough similarities to other regions of the world. The arrival of Europeans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century further shaped the relationship of Africa to a wider world.

##### II. African Societies: Diversity and Similarities

###### A. Introduction

African political society and culture varied enormously from one region to another. Although universal religions--Christianity and Islam--did penetrate Africa, religious and political diversity remained the common denominators of African history.

###### B. Stateless Societies

Some African societies were organized around kinship groups without the institutions associated with state formation. Stateless societies lacked formal bureaucracies, individual rulers and councils, tax systems, and armies. In West Africa, secret societies cut across kinship lines to limit the feuding that was customary in groups organized according to kinship. Such secret societies served as alternatives to state authority. Stateless societies were in a constant process of fragmentation and reformation, but they were vulnerable to external pressures and unable to organize for large-scale military or commercial ventures.

###### C. Common Elements in African Societies

There were some similarities among many African societies. The migration of the Bantu-speaking peoples provided a common linguistic base. Animistic religion and witchcraft characterized many African societies. African peoples tended to believe in a creator deity who operated through lesser spirits and the original settlers of the land. Ancestor worship was common to much of African religion. Africa was more divided than united by geography. Northern Africa was part of the wider Mediterranean world. The ecologies of sub-Saharan Africa

varied widely, but in many areas, agricultural societies supported market economies and commercial activity. Participation in international trade with economies outside of Africa precipitated political changes and stimulated the growth of African merchant groups but did not result in rapid technological progress. It is possible that the African population numbered 30 million to 60 million by 1500.

#### D. The Arrival of Islam in North Africa

Northern Africa had been an integral part of the classical world and during the Roman Empire it was exposed to Christianity. Between 640 C.E. and 700 C.E., much of northern Africa fell to Muslim armies in the first expansion of Islam. Much of the Berber population was converted to Islam and eventually created regional states at Fez and Sijilimasa. During the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, radical reformers among the Berber--first the Almoravids, then the Almohadi--moved southward against the African kingdoms of the sub-Saharan region. Islam appealed to African rulers as a means of justifying their authority. The Islamic doctrine of equality put Africans, Berbers, and Arabs on an equal footing.

#### E. The Christian Kingdoms: Nubia and Ethiopia

Christian communities survived in eastern Africa from the classical period. The Christian Coptic Church of Egypt survived the Islamic expansion and even extended its influence to the kingdom of Kush. The Ethiopian kingdom that followed Axum in eastern Africa was the most important of the independent Christian enclaves. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, an Ethiopian kingdom under an ancient dynasty continued to resist Muslim advance.

### III. Kingdoms of the Grasslands

#### A. Introduction

African states developed in the grasslands south of the Sahara through a fusion of Islam with African cultures. Islamic influence reached Africa through the three 'coasts': the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and the savanna at the edge of the Sahara. The grasslands were part of a trading network linking Mediterranean North Africa with the forest regions to the south. In this savanna region, important African states developed. Ghana, founded in the third century C.E., was the first of the savanna states. The Almoravids broke the power of Ghana in 1076.

#### B. Sudanic States

There were several Sudanic states that emerged in the sub-Saharan savannas. These states typically were governed by a patriarch or council of elders from a specific kinship group, possessed a territorial core from which conquest was launched, and depended on taxes and tribute drawn from subordinate villages or regions. After the tenth century, Islam supported the growth of kingship. Of the numerous Sudanic states, Mali and Songhay were the most important.

#### C. The Empire of Mali and Sundiata, the "Lion Prince"

Mali was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Malinke peoples broke away from Ghana. As in other Sudanic kingdoms, the Mali royal family embraced Islam as a means of strengthening their authority. Mali's prosperity depended on agriculture and the control of trade routes linking the gold fields to the south with the Mediterranean. Mali's period of expansion occurred under the successful ruler, Sundiata. Sundiata divided up the Malinke into clans with specific occupations

and established the principles of Mali's government. After Sundiata's death, his successors expanded his kingdom to control most of the Niger valley.

#### D. City Dwellers and Villagers

Cities developed in Mali in response to the centralization of authority and the expansion of trade. Some cities, such as Jenne and Timbuktu, were not only great trading emporia, but also cultural and educational centers. Despite the prominence of urban centers, most people in Mali depended on agriculture. Most agricultural holdings were small, family-owned holdings worked by the head of the household, his wives, and his sons. Despite relatively poor soils, Mali farmers supplied sufficient food to support an imperial state.

#### E. The Songhay Kingdom

As Mali declined, the kingdom of Songhay regained its independence and replaced its former masters as an imperial power in the Niger River valley. Songhay, with its capital at Gao, flourished on the basis of the gold trade during the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its most powerful leader was Sunni Ali (1464 to 1492). By the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, Songhay dominated the central Sudan. Like other Sudanic states, Songhay represented a cultural fusion of Islam with indigenous traditions. Invasion from Morocco in 1591 precipitated the downfall of Songhay's empire. Other states developed among the Hausa peoples of northern Nigeria beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. These states were based on cities that managed to control substantial amounts of territory militarily. Outside the Sudan, Islam penetrated Africa along trade routes. Even in non-Muslim areas, Islamic minorities were established among the populations.

#### F. Political and Social Life in the Sudanic States

The development of unified states under dominant groups or clans superimposed order over a collection of communities and kinship groups. Islam provided a unifying thread to the Sudanic states. It offered a common law for merchants, reinforced the authority of ruling groups, and provided a literate bureaucracy to aid in the process of government. State formation in the Sudan, as elsewhere, increased social stratification. Islam was forced to accommodate indigenous religious practices in the Sudan, and many residents of Mali and Songhay never converted to the new religion. One area in which indigenous practices remained unchanged was the relatively high status accorded women in Sudanic society and the practice of matrilineal descent. Although slavery had existed in Africa prior to the coming of Islam, Muslim demand for slaves and the commercialization of the region intensified the practice.

### IV. The Swahili Coast of East Africa

#### A. Introduction

Along Africa's Indian Ocean coast, trading cities astride the commercial routes between Africa and Asia developed. Although Islamicized, these cities retained much of the indigenous Swahili culture.

#### B. The Coastal Trading Ports

The Swahili coast was settled by Bantu-speaking peoples between the first and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. Contact with Asian peoples dated to the second century B.C.E., at which time Asians reached the

island of Madagascar and introduced bananas and coconuts to Africa. By the eighth and ninth centuries, traders from the Persian Gulf and Oman established a foothold on the eastern coast of Africa. As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, cities based on trade dotted the coastline. Muslim families ruled these city-states, including Mogadishu, Mombasa, Malindi, Kilwa, Pate, and Zanzibar. These cities exchanged ivory, gold, iron, slaves, and animals from the African interior for luxury goods from Asia.

C. The Mixture of Cultures on the Swahili Coast

The expansion of Islam to South and Southeast Asia during the 13<sup>th</sup> century helped to bring the cities of the Swahili coast into the Muslim Eurasian trade network. While ruling families and merchants converted to Islam, much of the population retained their indigenous beliefs. The Swahili language of the coastal cities had a Bantu base with a large admixture of Arabic words. Beyond the cities, Islam barely penetrated the interior of southern Africa. Islamic traditions did have a cultural impact on inheritance that was widespread, but much of Islamic cultural influence was limited to the African elite of the cities. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese successfully imposed their control over much of the Swahili coastal trade.

V. Peoples of the Forest and Plains

A. Introduction

Although preliterate, advanced African cultures and states developed along the western coast of Sub-Saharan Africa and in the interior.

B. Artists and Kings: Yoruba and Benin

In the interior of Nigeria, several advanced cultures developed. The earliest of these was ancient Nok, where the population practiced agriculture, used iron, and produced terra-cotta works between 500 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. After a hiatus, the same region produced other cultures among Yoruba-speaking peoples. The city of Ile-Ife controlled an agrarian society and, after 1200 C.E., produced portrait bronzes and terra-cotta works seemingly associated with royalty. Other Yoruba-speaking city-states developed in the same region. A king, possibly considered divine, controlled each of the cities. In Oyo, which emerged in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, kings directed “princes” who were drawn from local lineages in neighboring villages. A council of nobles and a secret society circumscribed the authority of the kings. Similar in structure and development to the Yoruba city-states was Benin, formed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century among the Edo peoples. Benin controlled a region along the Niger River to the coast. Like the Yoruba, the people of Benin produced remarkable works of art in ivory and cast bronze.

C. Central African Kingdoms

The Bantu migration extended south of the Congo rain forest region to the savannas of southern Africa by the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. After 1000 C.E., African societies in this region began to supplement kinship-based societies with kingship. Among the more important kingdoms was Katanga, where the ruler and his family achieved a semi-divine character. The royal bureaucracy was also kinship oriented.

D. The Kingdoms of Kongo and Mwene Mutapa

The kingdom of Kongo flourished on the lower Congo River by the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Organized in agricultural villages around the capital of Mbanza Kongo, the kingdom consisted of a confederacy of smaller states under the control of a relatively powerful ruler, or *manikongo*. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the kingdom was divided into eight provinces. Another large Bantu confederation grew up around a series of royal enclaves built after the ninth century C.E. The greatest of these royal enclaves was Great Zimbabwe, which served as the center of the kingdom. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the rulers of Great Zimbabwe, called Mwene Mutapa, were able to create a more centralized state that extended from the interior of southeastern Africa to the Indian Ocean coast. Its prosperity was based on control of the gold sources in the interior. Despite fragmentation, continued control of gold fields allowed the kingdom to survive into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

VI. Global Connections: Internal Development and External Contacts

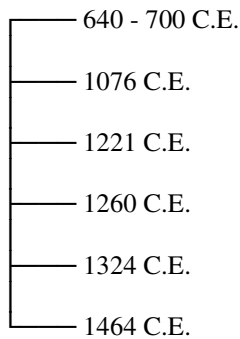
The spread of Islam into Africa tied the continent more closely to the civilizations of Eurasia. In much of Africa, the fusion of Islamic and indigenous culture produced an important synthesis. In other areas of Africa, particularly south of the southern rain forests, Bantu concepts of kingship and state formation continued to develop without much contact with Islamic culture. When Europeans arrived in Africa in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they discovered powerful kingdoms that already had long histories and patterns of trade that linked Africa to the wider commercial world.

## TIMELINE

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

death of Lalibela, founder of Ethiopian dynasty  
Almoravid invasion of Ghana  
*hajj* of Mansa Kankan Musa

death of Sundiata, founder of Mali  
Muslims conquer North Africa  
death of Sunni Ali, founder of Songhay



## TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

*The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.*

stateless societies  
Almoravids  
the Sahel  
*Juula*  
Timbuktu  
Hausa states  
Ibn Batuta  
Nok  
Kingdom of Kongo

Ifriqiya  
Almohadis  
Sudanic states  
Sundiata  
Songhay  
*Sharia*  
demography  
Yoruba  
Great Zimbabwe

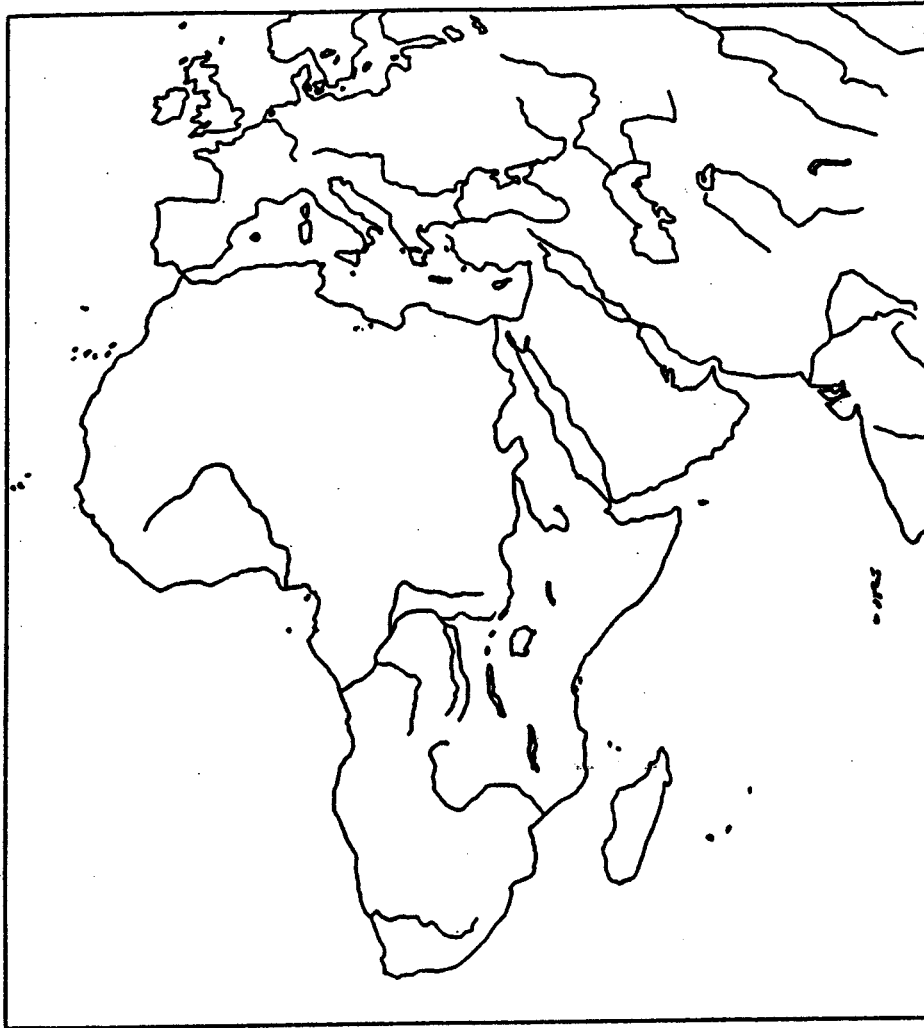
Maghrib  
Ethiopia  
Mali  
*griots*  
Askia Muhammad  
*Zanj*  
demographic transition  
Benin

## MAP EXERCISE

*The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.*

Mali  
the Swahili city-states

Songhay  
Great Zimbabwe



Islam impacted many of the emerging states of Africa after the tenth century. Which of the above states was not affected? How was the arrival of Islam connected to trade and commerce? How does this help to explain the dissemination of Islam within Africa?

## **MAKING CONNECTIONS**

*The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.*

1. What does the text describe as the “common elements” in African societies?
2. How did Islam enter Africa?
3. What were the Sudanic states and how were they organized?
4. How did Islam fuse with indigenous customs within the Sudanic states?
5. What was the connection between East Africa and Islam?
6. Where did cultures develop in Africa that were *NOT* affected by Islam? What was the nature of their organization?

## **PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER**

*The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.*

1. What portions of Africa were more vulnerable to Islamic cultural influence? What was the nature of Islamic cultural impact? How did it affect state formation?
2. Compare and contrast the Islamic impact on India and Southeast Asia with the religion’s affect on sub-Saharan Africa.



## SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Between 800 C.E. and 1500 C.E., as the frequency of contact with the outside world increased, what was the most significant impact on sub-Saharan Africa?
  - a. the arrival of the Portuguese
  - b. the arrival of Christianity
  - c. the arrival of Islam
  - d. the arrival of Chinese merchants
  
2. Stateless societies in Africa were
  - a. organized around kinship or other forms of obligation and lacking the concentration of political power and authority.
  - b. limited to the region of the Sudan, where trading societies remained free of centralized forms of government.
  - c. grouped around the principle of city-states similar to those found on the Swahili coast of East Africa.
  - d. imperial forms of government such as the ones that existed in the kingdoms of Kongo and Great Zimbabwe.
  
3. What was the function of secret societies in African culture?
  - a. They smuggled valuable gold across the Sahara and established vital trade routes with the Mediterranean.
  - b. Because secret societies were restricted to females, they permitted women to have an invisible, but powerful, role in African societies.
  - c. Because their membership cut across lineage divisions, they acted to maintain stability within communities and diminish clan feuds.
  - d. They served as a disruptive and revolutionary force in African society, forestalling the formation of larger states.
  
4. The grassland belt at the southern edge of the Sahara that served as a point of exchange between the forests of the south and the Mediterranean regions of Africa was called the
  - a. Sahel.
  - b. Zimbabwe.
  - c. qadi.
  - d. Almoravid.
  
5. Which of the following monarchs was referred to as Mali's "Lion Prince?"
  - a. Sundiata
  - b. Mahmud of Ghur
  - c. Mansa Kankan Musa
  - d. Sunni Ali

6. *Juula* were
  - a. military titles given to the rulers of Mali.
  - b. monumental temple complexes constructed of stone.
  - c. Islamic judges within African society.
  - d. African traders associated with the Mali Empire.
  
7. Specialists who mastered the oral traditions of the Malinke were called
  - a. qadis.
  - b. askia.
  - c. griots.
  - d. Mansa.
  
8. Sunni Ali was responsible for the creation of what African empire?
  - a. Mali
  - b. Ethiopia
  - c. Ghana
  - d. Songhay
  
9. How did contact with the Islamic world affect the African slave trade?
  - a. Early Muslim rulers actively suppressed the slave trade.
  - b. Slavery was unknown in African society until the Muslims introduced it.
  - c. Muslim commercial penetration of Africa accelerated the development of the slave trade.
  - d. Despite their acceptance of slavery, Muslims refused African slaves.
  
10. Zanj was the Arabic term for
  - a. the East African coast.
  - b. Islamic judges in African communities.
  - c. the grassland savanna south of the Sahara Desert.
  - d. the Islamic rulers of African communities.