



World History

Reading 1.1 – Pre-Contact African Empires

Name:

Section:

The people of sub-Saharan Africa: 2000 - 500 BC

Much of the southern part of the African continent is occupied by tribes known as Khoisan, characterized by a language with a unique click in its repertoire of sounds. The main divisions of the Khoisan are the San (often referred to until recent times as Bushmen) and the Khoikhoi (similarly known

until recently as Hottentots).

The tropical forests of central Africa are occupied largely by the Pygmies (with an average height of about 4'9", or less than 1.5m). But the Africans who will eventually dominate most of sub-Saharan Africa are tribes from the north speaking Bantu languages.



The Bantu languages probably derive from the region of modern Nigeria and Cameroon. This western area, bordering the Gulf of Guinea, is also the cradle of other early developments in African history.

Iron smelting is known here, as in other sites in a strip below the Sahara, by the middle of the 1st millennium BC. And the fascinating but still mysterious Nok culture, lasting from the 5th century BC to the 2nd century AD, provides magnificent pottery figures which stand at the beginning of a recognizably African sculptural tradition.

Probably during the first millennium BC, tribes speaking Bantu languages begin to move south. They gradually push ahead of them the Khoisan, in a process which will eventually make the Bantu masters of nearly all the southern part of the continent.

Meanwhile, in the regions immediately south of the desert, the first great kingdoms of sub-Saharan Africa become established during the first millennium AD.

The trading kingdoms of West Africa: 5th - 15th c.

A succession of powerful kingdoms in West Africa, spanning a millennium, are unusual in that their great wealth is based on trade rather than conquest. Admittedly much warfare goes on between them, enabling the ruler of the most powerful state to demand the submission of the others. But this is only the background to the main business of controlling the caravans of merchants and camels.

These routes run north and south through the Sahara. And the most precious of the commodities moving north is African gold.

The first kingdom to establish full control over the southern end of the Saharan trade is Ghana - situated not in the modern republic of that name but in the southwest corner of what is now Mali, in the triangle formed between the Senegal River to the west and the Niger to the east.

Ghana is well placed to control the traffic in gold from Bambuk, in the valley of the Senegal. This is the first of the great fields from which the Africans derive their alluvial gold (meaning gold carried downstream in a river and deposited in silt, from which grains and nuggets can be extracted).

Like subsequent great kingdoms in this region, Ghana is at a crossroads of trade routes. The Saharan caravans link the Mediterranean markets to the north with the supply of African raw materials to the south. Meanwhile

along the savannah (or open grasslands) south of the Sahara communication is easy on an east-west axis, bringing to any commercial center the produce of the whole width of the continent.

While gold is the most valuable African commodity, slaves run it a close second. They come mainly from the region around Lake Chad, where the Zaghawa tribes make a habit of raiding their neighbors and sending them up the caravan routes to Arab purchasers in the north.

Other African products in demand around the Mediterranean are ivory, ostrich feathers and the cola nut (containing caffeine and already popular 1000 years ago as the basis for a soft drink).

The most important commodity coming south with the caravans is salt, essential in the diet of African agricultural communities. The salt mines of the Sahara (sometimes controlled by Berber tribes from the north, sometimes by Africans from the south) are as valuable as the gold fields of the African rivers (see Salt mines and caravans). Traders from the north also bring dates and a wide range of metal goods - weapons, armor, and copper either in its pure form or as brass (the alloy of copper and zinc).

Ghana and its successors: 8th - 16th century

Ghana remains the dominant kingdom of West Africa for a very long period, from well before the 8th century to the 13th. The prosperity resulting from its activities is evident in the town of Jenne - by 800 already a thriving town on the Niger.

In the 13th century the gold field of Bure, on the upper reaches of the Niger, becomes more important than Bambuk. The shift in economic power is followed by a political change when a warrior by the name of Sundiata conquers Ghana and establishes the even more extensive kingdom of Mali - stretching from the Atlantic coast to beyond the Niger.

In the 15th century the western trade route through the Sahara to Morocco declines in importance, and a central one up to Tunis carries more of the desert trade. This change prompts the decline of the Mali kingdom - to be replaced for a while by another power further to the east, that of the Songhay people. Their capital is the city of Gao, built on both banks of the Niger downstream of the great curve in the river.

At the end of the 16th century Gao too loses its dominant position. By then a new foreign power is establishing a presence on African coasts, with a new religion, Christianity. But the Christians are four centuries behind the Muslims in penetrating these regions.

Islam in east Africa: 8th - 11th century

Africa is the first region into which Islam is carried by merchants rather than armies. It spreads down the well-established trade routes of the east coast, in which the coastal towns of the Red Sea (the very heart of Islam) play a major part.

There is archaeological evidence from the 8th century of a tiny wooden mosque, with space enough for about ten worshippers, as far south as modern Kenya - on Shanga, one of the islands offshore from Lamu. Shanga's international links at the time are further demonstrated by surviving fragments of Persian pottery and Chinese stoneware.

By the 11th century, when Islam makes its greatest advances in Africa, several settlements down the east coast have stone mosques.



At Kilwa, on the coast of modern Tanzania, a full-scale Muslim dynasty is established at this period. Coins from about 1070 give the name of the local ruler as 'the majestic Sultan Ali bin al-Hasan'. Three centuries later the Muslim traveler Ibn Batuta finds Kilwa an extremely prosperous sultanate, busy with trade in gold and slaves. In the 20th century Muslims remain either a majority or a significant minority in most regions of the east African coast. But the early penetration of Islam is even more effective down the caravan routes of West Africa.

Islam in West Africa: 8th - 11th century

From the 8th century Islam spreads gradually south in the oases of the Sahara trade routes. By the 10th century many of the merchants at the southern end of the trade routes are Muslims. In the 11th century the rulers begin to be converted.

The first Muslim ruler in the region is the king of Gao, from about the year 1000. The ruling classes of other communities follow suit. The king of Ghana, the most powerful realm, is one of the last to accept Islam - probably in the 1070s.

The effect of Islam on African communities, with their own strong traditional cultures, is a gradual process. In 1352 Ibn Batuta visits Mali. He is impressed by the people's regularity in saying their prayers, but he looks with stern disapproval at certain practices which are more evidently African.

He particularly frowns upon performances by masked dancers, and on the tendency of women to walk about in an unseemly shortage of clothing.

Mali is famous throughout the Islamic world at the time of Ibn Batuta's visit, because only a generation earlier its ruler has astonished Cairo by his wealth.

In 1324 Mansa Musa, the sultan of Mali, decides to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. His richly attired retinue and his heavily laden animals reflect his financial status - for he effectively controls the African gold trade which now supports the currency not only of Islamic states but of European communes and kingdoms. (The most valuable coins of Roman Catholic Europe have until recently been minted in silver, but Genoa, Florence and Venice reintroduce gold in the late 13th century and northern kingdoms soon follow their example.)

Contemporary accounts say that when Mansa Musa passes through Cairo, on his way to Mecca, his caravan numbers 60,000 people and his camels carry 12 tons of gold. He distributes largesse to religious institutions and to fawning courtiers alike.

Indeed he is so generous with the abundant gold of Mali that the value of the metal in Cairo suffers a temporary slump. But the reputation of Africa and its wealth is securely established.

The forest kingdoms of West Africa: 11th - 15th c.

The great trade routes to the north, through the kingdoms first of Ghana and then of Mali and Gao, gradually provide a market for the produce of the forest regions of west Africa.

Unlike the open savannah of the northern kingdoms, the conditions of life in the tropical rain forest make it difficult for small communities to coalesce into more powerful states. But one such state emerges among the Yoruba people during the 11th century. It is Ife, famous now for its sculpture (see the Sculpture of Ife and Benin). Lying west of the Niger and just within the border of the forest (in present-day Nigeria), Ife has the

economic advantage of being close to a gold field.

In the 15th century Ife is eclipsed by a neighboring kingdom, Benin, lying a little to the southeast and further into the forest. Rule from Benin City is established by a warrior king, Ewuare, over a forest region some seventy-five miles in extent. When the Portuguese arrive, in 1486, they are greatly impressed by many elements of Benin. They are struck by the sophistication of life in the royal palace. They admire the efficiency of the administration.

But most of all they marvel, as the world has continued to marvel, at the brass sculptures of Benin - in a realistic tradition deriving from the nearby example of Ife (see the Sculpture of Ife and Benin).

Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe: 11th - 15th c.

The plateau between the rivers Zambezi and Limpopo, in southeast Africa, offers rich opportunities for human settlement. Its grasslands make excellent grazing for cattle. The tusks of dead elephants provide an easy basis for a trade in ivory. A seam of gold, running along the highest ridge, shows signs of having been worked in at least four places before 1000 AD.

The earliest important trading center is at Mapungubwe, on the bank of the Limpopo. The settlement is established by a cattle-herding people, whose increasing prosperity leads to the emergence of a sophisticated court and ruling elite.

In 1075 the ruler of Mapungubwe separates his own dwelling from those of his people. He moves his court from the plain to the top of a sandstone hill, where he rules from a palace with imposing stone walls.

It is the first example of the *Zimbabwe* of this region - a word in Shona, the local Bantu language, meaning literally 'stone houses'. *Zimbabwe* became the characteristic dwellings of chieftains, and about 100 hilltop ruins of this kind survive. Easily the most impressive is the group known as Great Zimbabwe, which in the 13th century succeeds Mapungubwe as the dominant Shona power - with a kingdom stretching over the whole region between the Limpopo and the Zambezi.

Great Zimbabwe is not close to the local gold seam, but its power derives from controlling the trade in gold. By this period mine shafts are sunk to a depth of 100 feet. Miners (among them women and children) descend these shafts to bring up the precious metal. As much as a ton of gold is sometimes extracted in a year.

The buildings of Great Zimbabwe are evidence of equally great labor. Massive stone walls enclose a palace complex with a great conical tower, while impressive dry-stone granite masonry is used in a fortress or acropolis at the top of a nearby hill. The buildings date from the 13th and 14th centuries, the peak of Great Zimbabwe's power.

In the 15th century Great Zimbabwe is eclipsed by two other kingdoms, one to the south at Khami (near modern Bulawayo) and one to the north, near Mount Darwin. This latter kingdom is established by a ruler who is known as the Munhumutapa - a title adopted by all his successors.

The Munhumutapa is the potentate of whom word is sent home to Europe by new arrivals on the African coast in the early 16th century. His court is first reached by a Portuguese traveler in about 1511.

Gascoigne, Bamber. "History of Sub-Saharan Africa." History of Sub-Saharan Africa. HistoryWorld.net, n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.