

CHAPTER
15

CHAPTERS IN BRIEF

Societies and Empires of Africa, 800–1500

Summary

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *In north and central Africa, people lived by hunting and gathering. Later followers of Islam built states that joined religious and political power. In West Africa, empires built on wealth from trade rose and fell. In East Africa, a blend of African and Muslim cultures created several cities that enjoyed thriving trade. In Southern Africa, one trading empire gave way to another.*

1 North and Central African Societies

KEY IDEA *North and central Africa developed hunting-gathering societies, stateless societies, and Muslim states.*

People in early African societies began to get food by hunting and gathering. Some societies today use these methods as well. Scholars study them to obtain clues about the lives of people in the past. They recognize, though, that there is no exact relationship between how people lived then and now.

The Efe, who live in the rain forest of central Africa, are one group of hunter-gatherers that are studied. They live in groups of between 10 and 100 people, all being related to one another. Each family lives in its own shelter, made of grass and brush. They keep few possessions so that they can move often in the search for food.

Women perform the work of gathering. They travel through the forest looking for roots, yams, mushrooms, and seeds. Men and older boys do the hunting, killing small antelopes or monkeys. The group is led by an older male, but he does not give orders or act like a chief. Each family makes its own decisions, but they do ask the leader for his advice.

These African societies are organized along family ties. Families, however, are understood in broader terms than simply parents and children. Societies trace their families in terms of lineages, counting as related all people who share a common ancestor. The lineage includes not just living members but those born in the past and those yet to be born. In some societies, lineages are traced through mothers and in others they are traced through fathers.

In many African societies, lineage groups took the place of rulers. These societies are called state-

less societies because they do not have central governments. Authority in these societies was spread among more than one lineage to prevent any one family from dominating. Within these societies, people use discussion to settle conflicts between groups.

Some African societies also have another set of relationships important to people. Children of similar ages form into groups called age sets. All members of the age set take part in ceremonies. These signal the movement from one stage of life to the next.

An important influence on the history of Africa was Islam, which arrived in the continent in the late 600s. By 670, Muslims ruled Egypt and most of North Africa. In their new states, the ruler served as both political and religious leader. The Islamic tradition of obeying the law helped promote order and support the government. The common influence of Islamic law also forged bonds between the different North African states.

Among the North Africans who converted to Islam were a group called the Berbers. In the 11th century, a group of Berbers became strongly committed to spreading Islam. They were called the Almoravids. They conquered modern Morocco around 1060, the empire of Ghana by 1076, and parts of Spain.

They were displaced in the 1100s by another group of Berbers, the Almohads. They arose in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and opposed the Almoravids. They said Almoravids no longer followed strict Muslim teaching. Almohads, too, captured Morocco and then Spain. They extended their power as far east as the cities of Tripoli and Tunis. Within about 100 years, this empire broke up into smaller states.

2 West African Civilizations

KEY IDEA *West Africa contained several powerful empires and states, including Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.*

Trade was conducted across the vast Sahara Desert of North Africa as early as A.D. 200, but it was not regular. The pack animals of the time—oxen, donkeys, and horses—could not travel far in the desert. Then Berbers began using camels. Since these animals were ideally suited to dry conditions, trade became regular and frequent.

By the 700s, the rulers of the kingdom of Ghana were growing rich. They taxed the goods that traders carried through their land. The two most important trade goods were gold and salt. Gold was taken from deep mines or from streams in the western and southern parts of West Africa. The people there were eager to trade for salt from the Sahara region. Arab traders brought cloth and manufactured goods from the cities on the Mediterranean Sea to the north.

The king of Ghana made sure that the price of gold stayed high. Only the king could own gold nuggets. As religious and military leader, as well as head of the government, the king was powerful. By the year 800, Ghana had become an empire, controlling the people of different regions nearby.

Over time, Muslim merchants and traders brought their religion to Ghana. By the 1000s, the kings converted to Islam and began to use Muslims as advisers. Many common people in the empire, though, stayed with their traditional beliefs. Later, Ghana fell to the Almoravids of North Africa. After that, Ghana never regained its former power.

By 1235, a new kingdom began—Mali. It arose south of Ghana, but its wealth and power was also based on the gold trade. Founder of the kingdom was Sundiata, who became the first emperor. After winning a series of battles, he set up a well-organized government to run his kingdom.

Later Mali rulers adopted Islam. One of them was Mansa Musa. He used his skill in leading an army to make Mali twice the size of the old empire of Ghana. To rule this large empire, he named governors to head several provinces. Mansa Musa was a devoted Muslim. He had new mosques, or houses of worship, built in two cities. One of those cities, Timbuktu, became known as a leading center of Muslim learning. A later traveler to the area named Ibn Battuta described how peaceful Mali was. Mali, though, declined in the 1400s and was replaced by another empire that grew wealthy from gold.

The next trading empire was Songhai, and it was farther to the east than Mali. It arose in the 1400s when Sunni Ali used river canoes and horses to strike quickly. He gained control of new areas—including the city of Timbuktu. He was followed by Askia Muhammad. He was a Muslim with a deep sense of religious feeling who was determined to run the empire in the way of Islam. The Songhai Empire fell, however, because other people had stronger weapons. In 1591, a Moroccan army used gunpowder and cannons to beat a Songhai army that had only swords and spears. This defeat ended the period when empires controlled West Africa.

In other parts of West Africa, people gathered in city-states that remained independent of these empires. In what is today northern Nigeria, the Hausa people built city-states between the years 1000 and 1200. They depended on the food raised by farmers and on trade in salt, grain, and cotton cloth. One city-state also traded people as slaves. No one city was powerful enough to control its neighbors for long.

In the southern part of Nigeria and modern Benin another people arose—the Yoruba. They lived in smaller communities that survived by farming. Some of these villages were joined together in small kingdoms. The people believed that the kings were gods. Kings surrounded themselves with a large court of musicians, magicians, and soldiers. At the same time, a secret society of religious and political leaders reviewed the king's actions and limited his power. Two powerful Yoruba kingdoms were called Ife and Oyo. Ife lasted from 1100 until the late 1600s, when Oyo arose. Both were centered in cities with high walls, and both were supported by highly productive farms. Ife had skilled artists who produced work in ivory, wood, pottery, bronze, brass, and copper.

To the south and west was another kingdom, Benin. The kingdom arose in the 1300s and reached its peak of power 100 years later. At that time, King Ewuare extended his control over an area from the delta of the Niger River as far east as the modern city of Lagos, Nigeria. He made Benin City, his capital, stronger by building high walls. He also built a huge palace full of works of art. In the 1480s, ships from Portugal arrived in the major port of Benin to trade. Their arrival marked the beginning of a long period of European interference in the history of Africa.

3 Eastern City-States and Southern Empires

KEY IDEA From 1000 to 1500, East African city-states and southern African empires gained wealth and power through trade.

The east coast of Africa became an area marked by a blend of cultures. Africans speaking Bantu languages moved to the area from central Africa. Arab and Persian Muslims came from the north and east to make trading contacts. These peoples created a new blended language called Swahili. It became common in the port cities of the east coast of Africa.

The Persian and Arab traders brought porcelain bowls from China and jewels and cotton cloth from India. They bought ivory, gold, tortoise shells, and other goods in Africa to take back to Asia. By 1300, this thriving trade took place in more than 35 cities on the coast. Some cities became centers for manufactured goods, such as weaving and the making of iron tools.

One of the richest of these trading ports was Kilwa. It was located to the south—as far south as traders could reach from India and return in the same season. Thus all trade goods from farther south had to come through Kilwa. In 1488, though, the situation changed. Ships arrived on the east coast of Africa from Portugal. Portuguese sailors were looking for a route to India to join in the trade for spices and other goods desired in Europe. Soon the Portuguese used their cannon power to attack Kilwa and other trading centers in Africa. They burned parts of some cities and took control of others. For the next two centuries, the Portuguese remained a powerful force in the region.

On the east coast of Africa, as in West Africa, the growing contact with Muslim traders resulted in the adoption of Islam. A sultan, or governor, ruled each city. Most government officials and wealthy merchants were Muslims. As in West Africa, though, most common people kept their traditional beliefs.

Along with trade goods, the Muslim traders also engaged in the trade of human slaves. Enslaved persons did household tasks in such areas as Arabia and Persia. Some were sent to India to be used as soldiers. This slave trade was not large, however. Only about 1,000 people a year were traded as slaves. The later European-run slave trade was much broader.

In southern Africa, a great city-state arose in the 1000s. The Shona people lived in rich land, where they grew crops and raised cattle. Their city, called Great Zimbabwe, had a good location. It linked the gold fields inland with the trading cities on the coast. From the 1200s through the 1400s, the city controlled this trade and grew wealthy. Around 1450, though, the people left the city, although no one knows why. One explanation is that overuse had destroyed the grasslands, soil, and timber. It is thought the area could no longer support a large population. Acres of ruins remain as silent reminders of the past of Zimbabwe. They include stone buildings and a high wall carved with figures of birds.

Heir to Great Zimbabwe was the Mutapa Empire. It began around 1420 when a man named Mutota left the area and moved farther north looking for salt. He and his successors took control of a large area—almost all of the land of the modern country of Zimbabwe. This empire gained wealth from the gold in its land. The rulers forced people they had conquered to mine their gold, which they then sold on the coast. The southern region of the empire formed its own kingdom. In the 1500s, the Portuguese moved in. They tried to defeat the empire but could not. Later, through trickery, they gained control of the government.

Review

1. **Comparing and Contrasting** How did social groupings in north and central African societies differ from that of American society today?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** What religion had influence throughout Africa? Did that influence extend to all levels of society?
3. **Determining Main Ideas** What common feature linked the kingdoms and empires of West Africa?
4. **Developing Historical Perspective** How does Swahili symbolize the blending of cultures in East Africa?
5. **Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** How did location add to the power of Kilwa?