

African Civilization and the Spread of Islam

C9

EQs: What are the major features of civilizations in Africa and how do they differ?

How does Islam impact Africa?



Introduction

- Africa below the Sahara had only limited contact with the Mediterranean and Asia
- Social, religious and technological changes influenced Africa, particularly after Islam arrives, opening trade with emerging empires/civilizations
- State/Empire building in Africa was influenced by both the indigenous peoples AND by Islam
- Still, parts of far southern Africa remained isolated and consisted largely of migratory peoples until the 15th -17th centuries



African Society

- Though similar in language and religious beliefs, there was diversity in African society...political states differed greatly
- Political entities ranged from large central authorities (kingdoms) to “stateless” societies to tribal kinships (family)
- “Stateless” peoples were controlled by family lineages with limited power/central authority...most societies had authority held in communal gatherings/councils
- These entities were mainly weak, particularly in mobilizing for war, undertaking large state projects or promoting long distance trade



Common Elements in African Society

- There were MANY similarities throughout African diversity:
 - 1: Bantu is the common linguistic base
 - 2: Practice of animism, beliefs in natural forces, personified gods and good and evil...there were priests (witchdoctors) who guided these practices
 - 3: Common belief in a creator deity, connected to the people by lesser spirits and deceased ancestors
 - 4: Economic activities involved sedentary agriculture, metal working and simple trade...the market was key in African society



Islam Comes to Africa

- North Africa, the outposts of Rome which had now become independent kingdoms, were first swept up by Islam in the early 8th century (Ifriqiya and Maghrib)
- Conversion was rapid, but soon divided the North into competing states
- The Berbers of North Africa (Almoravids) controlled trade connections across the Sahara to Europe
- Islam began to gain great appeal in Africa solely based on its principles of unity, equity and its simple religious practices
- However, social/sexual disparities remained in African society



Christian Kingdoms in Africa

- Both Nubia (Kush) and Ethiopia pre-existed the arrival of Islam as Christian states, both of which were mainly subject to control by the Byzantines...both kingdoms welcomed Muslim influences, mainly for the purposes of trade
- When Muslims tried to “take over”, both kingdoms resisted...geography helped maintain Christianity, as churches were carved into the rock throughout the country



The Grassland Kingdoms

- In Africa, kingdoms sprung up in the Sahel, an extensive grassland belt found south of the Sahara, mainly drained by the Niger River
- For centuries, camel caravans had crossed the Sahara from North African states in the Roman Empire...in the Sahel, many trade centers (cities) emerged as city states at the center of large kingdoms
- Kingdoms included Ghana, Mali, Songhai(y) and the Hausa
- These states were led early on by a patriarch or council of elders from a family/lineage line (dynasty)...each was based on one single ethnic core...the rulers were regarded as sacred
- When Islam arrived in these kingdoms in the 10th century, it was used to unify people, but was NOT forced upon the people as a system of belief...only the rulers/elite practiced it



The Empire of Mali

- The Malinke peoples broke away from the kingdom of Ghana in the 13th C. ... Their founder, Sundiata (Lion Prince), receives credit for the founding/expansion of the empire
- Agriculture and gold trade became the main economic staples in this new empire... record keepers were called griots
- After Sundiata's death, new mansas (kings) maintained the empire... the most famous of these was Mansa Musa... he took the first pilgrimage to Mecca by an African leader in 1324 CE, a trip which was documented as bringing great sensation to North Africa



Mali: Cities and Villages

- As Islam came into the empire, it caused many cities to emerge as centers of trade, commerce and learning...major centers included Jenne Jenne and Timbuktu...in these cities one could find vast market places w/foreign merchants, large schools of Muslim learning and artisan workshops...Timbuktu had a famous library and university
- The villages were the primary focus on the agricultural activities of the empire...HOWEVER poor soils, primitive technology, droughts, insects and problems storing grain, farmers barely maintained a supportive measure of success for the empire



The Songhai(y) Kingdom

- Just as the Malinke had won freedom from Ghana, the Songhai won their freedom from Mali in the late 14th C.
- The Songhai were better farmers, had found a larger source of gold in the African rainforest, were more Muslim (though still blended local traditions) and had a large central city as well, Gao
- Sunni Ali strengthened the empire in the mid-15th C, capturing the Mali cities of Jenne Jenno and Timbuktu, he mobilized a massive army which swept over the Sahel...although a Muslim, he shunned the scholars in Timbuktu, even persecuted them if they disobeyed his will
- Life was similar to the Mali...though the Muslim clerics were appalled that Islam was not adhered to strictly within the kingdom...eventually they called for an invasion by the Almoravids of North Africa to “cleanse” Songhai...this was done by the end of the 16th C.



Swahili Africa

- A series of sea trading ports emerged on the East coast of Africa as city states...Islam came via trade to these cities and influenced the culture, **HOWEVER**, traditional ways remained prevalent
- Swahili became a result of this blending, a language which mixes both Arabic and Bantu
- City states on the east coast included Mombasa, Mogadishu, Kilwa, Pate, Malindi and Zanzibar...each competed as dominate trade ports, sending African raw materials to Arabia, India and China in return for luxury goods
- As a result, East Africa received many migrants from these regions, leading to a blending of all cultures combined and Swahili the predominate language



The Forest Peoples

- The West African rainforests were home to several cultures set apart from the Sudanic (Sahel) neighbor kingdoms
- The Nok developed between 500 BC and 200 AD, creating wood sculptures, iron agricultural tools and gold forging...they disappeared
- The Yoruba and Benin emerged 800+ years later in the same region
- The Yoruba civilization was a series of city states (50 mile radius of control) that was focused on agriculture...each had a divine king...his rule was not absolute as each city had councils of nobles that formed a secret society that also made decisions on behalf of the people
- Benin became a dominate Yoruba city state in the 14th C.
- Its ruler, the Oba, had more central authority than previous Yoruba rulers...Benin grew powerful in the artistic vein, making sculptures out of ivory, bronze and gold...eventually, they initiated the earliest trade with Europeans in the 15th C.



Central and South Africa

Central Africa

- ❏ Bantu groups in central Africa began to forge small kingdoms around 1000
- ❏ These kingdoms were largely based on agriculture but also were responsible to providing trade goods to kingdoms to the West (Yoruba) and East (Swahili) in the forms of animal skins and ivory

Southern Africa

- ❏ Kongo – this agricultural society emerged on the Congo River in the 15th C...the people were skilled in weaving, pottery, blacksmithing and carving...there was sharp gender division, with women working fields and the house and men hunting and trading
- ❏ Great Zimbabwe – was an impressive city-state in E. central Southern Africa near the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers...it had massive stone walls and buildings...the king who took the title Mwene Mutapa ruled as a central figure...Great Zimbabwe was the center of trade for all of southern Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries, declining/disappearing mysteriously by 1700.

