

African Civilizations and the Spread of Islam

African Societies: Diversity and Similarities

- A wide variety of societies developed in Africa. This diversity meant **political unity was difficult**. Though universal states and religions did not develop in Africa, **universal religions from elsewhere** did impact the region.
- Many Africans lived in **stateless societies**, which were organized around kinship or other forms of obligation and lacking concentration of political power.
- Despite Africa's remarkable diversity, some commonalities existed, including a common linguistic base (**Bantu**), and a tendency toward animistic religions. Economic conditions varied by geographic region, and historians have few reliable population numbers.
- In the second half of the 7th century, Mohammad's followers swept through north Africa and brought Islamic influence. The **Berbers**, a people of the Sahara desert, joined the **Almoravid** and **Almohadi** Islamic reform movements, launching into **jihad** against Spain and the **savanna** kingdoms of Africa. Islam's attractive promise of egalitarianism was not always fulfilled in practice, however.
- **Early Christian kingdoms** developed in northeastern Africa (in particular, **Nubia** and **Ethiopia**) and resisted Muslim encroachment for many centuries. These regions practiced a unique **Coptic** brand of Christianity.

Kingdoms of the Grasslands

- Trans-Saharan Muslim traders brought Islam to the **Sahel grasslands** of Africa. **Ghana**, which converted to Islam by the 10th century, was the first, great west African empire.
- The effective control of subordinate societies and the legal or informal control of their sovereignty are the usual definition of empires. The Sudanic states of Ghana, **Mali**, and **Songhay** fit that definition.
- Mali, created by the **Malinke** people in the 13th century, was an agricultural, Islamicized state that also depended on gold reserves. Trade was facilitated by Malinke merchants, or **juula**. **Griots**, or Malian oral historians, celebrated **Sundiata**, the founder of Mali's empire, as did the noted Arab traveler **Ibn Batuta**. **Mansa Musa**, perhaps Mali's greatest ruler, made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324.
- **Timbuktu** became a great trading and learning center, though most people in Mali relied on subsistence farming to survive.

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- Songhay, founded by **Sunni Ali** and expanded by **Muhammad the Great**, was the third great Sudanic state. Songhay fell at the end of the 16th century. The **Hausa** kingdoms of northern Nigeria also combined pagan and Muslim traditions.
 - The development of unified states provided an overarching structure that allowed the various groups and communities to coexist. **Sharia** was not always followed (for example, women tended to have greater freedom in the Sudanic states) as pagan traditions fused with Islam. Muslim influence also meant that more Africans became slaves than ever before.

The Swahili Coast of East Africa

- A string of Islamicized **trading ports** along Africa's Indian Ocean coast increased that region's contact with the Arabic, Indian, Persian, and Chinese worlds.
- **Zenj** (the Arabic word for the **Swahili Coast**) came under Muslim influence and many of its port towns were thriving by the 13th century.
- By the time the **Portuguese** gained control of **Mozambique** in the early 16th century, Swahili culture (a hybrid of Bantu and Arabic language and customs) was entrenched.

Peoples of the Forest and Plains

- Across central Africa, many preliterate agrarian societies thrived. Over time, several kingdoms developed.
- In **Nigeria**, the **Nok** culture reflected early artistic achievement; later, **Yoruba** culture was highly urbanized and politically organized. East of Yoruba, the **Benin** city-state was powerful enough to impress Portuguese visitors.
- South of the **Zambezi River**, beyond the influence of Islam, many central African peoples had begun their own process of state formation by about 1000, replacing the pattern of kinship-based societies with forms of political authority based on kingship.
- Along the Congo River, the state of **Kongo** was spread out in family-based villages and towns. There was a sharp division of labor between women and men.
- Another large Bantu confederation, with extensive trade connections, developed east of the Congo. Its headquarters were at **Great Zimbabwe**, an impressive set of stone structures.