

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

Essay Module

The African Exchange: Africa in Early Modern World History

The above image shows a European map of Africa, drawn around 1375, that depicts Northwest Africa and Mansa Musa, the legendary king of the Mali Empire. Source:

<http://proteus.brown.edu/islamicarchaeologyglossary2007/4800>.

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Unit Goals

After reading this essay you should be able to:

- 1) Describe the origins and early development of postclassical and early modern African civilizations.
- 2) Understand the influence of geography, topography and climate on Africa's historical development.
- 3) Identify important features of African political, military, and religious structures.
- 4) Explain and discuss features of different African socioeconomic groups and gender roles.
- 5) Understand the foundations and important features of local and regional African economies.
- 6) Describe the early processes and circumstances of contact between Africans and Europeans in the early modern period.

Africa: an Overview

Africa contains many of the incredibly diverse cultures, languages, environments, and geographical features found around the globe (the obvious exception being an Antarctic environment). The continent of Africa is a land mass covering 11, 363, 846 square miles (larger than China, India, Europe, the United States, and Argentina combined). Africa also boasts some of the highest peaks in the world—Mt. Kilimanjaro—19, 341 feet, and one of the longest rivers—the Nile—4, 187 miles long. Environments in Africa include savannah grasslands, the largest desert in the world, dense tropical rain forests, temperate climate zones, and one glacier (fast disappearing). Africa also boasts the most diverse population in the world, with



more than 3,000 ethnic groups, and over 1,000 languages, to say nothing of the numerous religious systems.

Much of Africa was organized around small communities (incorrectly labeled tribes in the West); Africans south of the Sahara based their societies on **kinship** or **age-groups**. Societies organized in this way involved many members of the community in decision-making and provided a social order where elders served as political leaders. Such systems worked partly due to the environment. In central and west Africa where dense tropical forests dominate, small kinship based communities worked best. Large centralized kingdoms proved unfeasible

because it was too difficult to control large populations in tropical regions. Similar to the situation Europeans faced with Native Americans, Africans simply disappeared into the forests to escape centralized authority. In direct contrast to tropical Africa, the savannah regions south of the **Sahara Desert** were conducive to large empires. States that emerged in the **savannah** of West Africa between A.D. 700 and 1600—**Ghana, Mali, and Songhai**, for example—brought numerous small communities under their control as well as the trans-Saharan trade. Unlike tropical Africa, the environment allowed large kingdoms because it was easier to move forces around by using larger river systems and grassy plains. Many of the great cities of these empires, Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne, monopolized oases along the Saharan trade routes. By controlling such points along the trading network, the rulers of Sudanic kingdoms grew wealthier and more powerful until they controlled large empires. Trade also brought Africans south of the Sahara into contact with new technologies and Islam.



Pre-15th century African connections

Africa contributed much to world history. Long before Europeans began their first wave of expansion in the fifteenth century, parts of Africa had already integrated into the long-distance trading networks of Asia, the Middle East, and Mediterranean world. Africa provided high-value commodities (gold, animal skins, ivory, spices, and slaves) for these regions dating back to the ancient period. North, East, and tropical West Africa also were greatly influenced by the contact resulting from early trading networks. By the fifteenth century, Christianity and Islam had spread down the eastern seaboard and across the vast Sahara Desert. Technology, such as iron smelting and gunpowder, also filtered through all but the southern half of the continent by 1400. Islam, for instance, spread from its base in Saudi Arabia across northern Africa and across the Sahara between 1000 and 1300 A.D. Despite popular stereotypes about jihad in spreading Islam, the faith found a ready reception among the urban populations of Africa's savannah kingdoms, particularly at Timbuktu and Gao in the eleventh century because of trade. One of the earliest kings of Mali, Barmadana, accepted Islam around 1050; the rulers of Kanem did so too in 1086. The most famous Muslim African ruler, however, was **Mansa Musa**, who made his legendary pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. For such kingdoms, Islam provided a tool of unification, because of its emphasis on a common language (Arabic) and a common law.

The kingdom of ancient **Ghana** was one of the most important early West African states founded by the Soninke. Ghana began with the unification of small chiefdoms in the Sahel (savannah) grasslands in exchange for protection from desert raiders. Like most African Iron Age societies, early domestication of sorghum and millet occurred here as well as new farming techniques. Its location on the edge of the Sahara brought the Soninke into contact with desert nomads (and Islam) and allowed them to grow powerful on the wealth garnered as middle-men

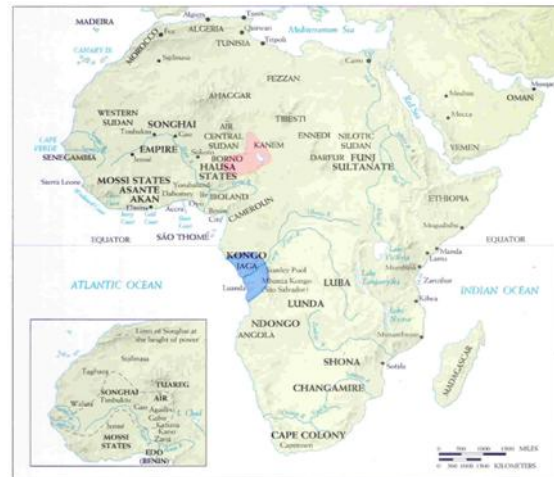
in the trans-Saharan trade. Ghana was midway between the desert—the main source of salt—and the gold fields of the upper Senegal River. By 1050, Ghana dominated the region. Like many of its successor states, Ghana declined soon afterward as trade routes shifted to areas with new resources opened farther to the south and east. Another reason for Ghana's decline was environmental deterioration (a common theme in African history), which made it more difficult to support a settled population.

The kingdom of **Mali** soon replaced Ghana. An even larger empire, Mali is traced to **Sundiata** (Keita clan), who organized resistance to desert raiders in the early thirteenth century. In 1235, he defeated his primary rival **Sumanguru** at Kirina and formed a new empire. Several factors explain the rise of Mali. There was little resistance to expansion under Sundiata in the wake of the political vacuum created by Ghana's collapse. Traditional organization of the Malinke people also contributed to the rise of a large kingdom. Note the title of the **mansa** or king of Mali. The village head or *mansa* was the person most directly descended from the first settlers of an area. As such, the mansa was the guardian of the ancestors (kinship), a religious and secular leader. The descendants of Sundiata consolidated the role of mansa into that of a single king in the thirteenth century. Thus, later rulers took the title Mansa Musa, for example. Secret societies (based on age groups) in West Africa further represented armed forces easily organized into a state army. Mali was also situated to control the fertile plains of the savannah, as well as rivers systems, which allowed it to benefit from trade and fishing. Finally, Islam contributed to the growth of Mali. It was the first Muslim West African state from its beginning until its end. Mali used literate Muslims for administrative work and traditional rulers who collected and forwarded tribute to the capital.

Mali's most infamous king, **Mansa Musa** ruled from 1312 to 1337. His rule of 25 years and smooth succession by his son and brother to the throne suggest the degree to which he succeeded. Moreover, Mansa Musa expanded Mali by using his army of 100,000 to centralize control and conquer additional provinces. Mansa Musa improved the administrative machine by placing well-paid governors over the subject provinces. In addition to the 1500 mithqals of gold paid to governors, officials also received clothes, horses, and personal fiefdoms. Mansa Musa was noted for his impartiality and justice, as he invited those with complaints to come directly to him for resolution. Mansa Musa established good foreign relations between his kingdom and those of North Africa, especially Morocco and Egypt. As part of the diplomatic relations, Mansa Musa regularly exchanged gifts and ambassadors with Morocco. Mansa Musa also contributed to religious change in West Africa. His leadership and wealth are the source of a legend that later brought Europeans to Africa in the fifteenth century. As a faithful Muslim, Mansa Musa undertook a pilgrimage (**Hajj**) to Mecca in 1324 and 1325. Sources claim Mansa Musa left Mali on the hajj with 80 to 100 camels loaded with hundreds of pounds in gold dust (300 by one account) and several thousand porters. Five hundred of these people were said to be slaves, carrying four pound gold rods before the king. One source suggests as many as 60,000 people accompanied the king. The expedition reached Cairo in July 1324, staying until September before moving on to Mecca. By the time he reached Cairo again on the return home to Mali, the king had bankrupted his entire entourage by giving away his wealth. Mansa Musa borrowed money to finish the trip (he repaid the amount soon after arriving back in Mali). One Muslim writer, al-Umari, who visited Cairo twelve years after the famed visit, wrote that the economy of Egypt still suffered from Mansa Musa's distribution of his wealth.

According to the legend, Mansa Musa gave away so much gold the commodity was worthless for years afterwards, causing massive inflation throughout the region. The pilgrimage brought great fame to the king, but was important for other reasons. The journey brought great publicity to Mali as the kingdom appeared on European maps for the first time. Trade between West Africa and Egypt increased. The king also returned home with a new determination to spread Islam throughout his kingdom. Mansa Musa brought in scholars, poets, missionaries, and technical experts, many from Spain.

In eastern Africa, similar connections brought Africa into a wider regional system. Both Christianity and Islam spread down the Nile River valley towards Ethiopia as well as through coastal trading. Greek traders recorded trade in the Indian Ocean between parts of East Africa and Asia in the first century B.C. Bantu-speaking farmers spread their settlements along the Indian Ocean coast and better-watered, wooded regions of East Africa during the early centuries of the first millennium. From these simple origins, a series of powerful trading states developed by the year 1,000 A.D. East Africa is generally considered two regions, one coastal and the other interior, because the peoples of the two regions have different experiences and developed along different paths. Coastal peoples looked to trade across the ocean rather than to develop trading networks in the interior like those that developed across the Sahara Desert in West Africa.



The spread of Islam gave the region a significant boost in the seventh and eighth centuries, especially after Shi'ite refugees from the Arabian Peninsula settled along the coast. It has been argued that these settlers, known as the **shirazi**, created the trading states of east Africa. More accurately, Muslim refugees intermarried with local inhabitants, creating a distinctive coastal society (called **Swahili**) Islamic in religion and culture, but African in language and personnel. Swahili (more accurately Kiswahili) means people of the coast. It is basically a Bantu language, which incorporated a number of Arabic words such as **Safari** (some of you may remember watching the show Omba Mokumba—Omba means “ask”—thus “ask Mokumba”). Swahili civilization became a merchant culture characterized by Muslim city-states ruled by either a king or oligarchy (sometimes a whole family). Between 1000 and 1300, Swahili Muslims moved south to settle on islands such as Zanzibar, Pemba, Kilwa, and the Comoros where they founded new trading states. Of these, **Kilwa** was the most important as by 1200 it had gained control of the gold trade of southern Africa. Swahili expansion eased the trade between Africa and the Muslim world, prompted conversion to Islam, and expanded African connections within Indian Ocean trade networks.

Kilwa provides a good illustration of a Swahili city-state. The original site, no longer inhabited, provides substantive information about the city as do Arab travelers' accounts. Arabic sources claim an Arab immigrant from Shiraz (modern Iran) founded Kilwa. The unidentified immigrant arrived by boat, disembarked, and liked the island. Thus, he asked the non-Muslim ruler to purchase it; the ruler agreed. The price, so the legend goes, was enough

colored cloth to circle the island. The king, however, planned to double-cross the Arab and take the island back after being paid. The crafty Arab foiled the ruler by digging out the channel between the island and the continent by reading passages from the Koran. The ruler was unable to return to the island, as a result. We are later told that one of the Shirazi married a daughter of the same king, which is the more credible explanation for the transition to Swahili control. The story of Kilwa's founding tells us several things. First, the Swahili recognized their integration into the larger Indian Ocean community by tracing their origins to an area outside East Africa. They also separated their identities from that of other Africans through Islam. Yet, the fact that one of the Shirazi married the African ruler's daughter suggests that they remained connected to Africa.

Early Contacts between Europe and Africa

A number of Africans visited Europe or at minimum made significant contributions to the civilization rising there long before Europeans traveled south along the western coast. **Averroes** or **Ibn-Rushd** (1126-1198) helped restore Aristotle to western philosophy. His commentaries on Aristotle revived interest in him in the west at the University of Paris. **Ibn Khaldon** (1332-1406) likewise contributed to European knowledge with his travel accounts on North Africa and Eurasia. His works fueled Western interest in West Africa in the later 15th century (remember Mansa Musa?). **Leo Africanus**, a Spanish-born traveler made two trips into West Africa between 1509 and 1513, increasing European interests in Africa. His tales of the legendary (and wealthy) Timbuktu prompted numerous efforts by European explorers to find the city.

Iberians likewise had prolonged contact with North Africa. For centuries Muslims dominated what became Spain and Portugal. As Europe grew in strength, beginning in the 13th century, Muslim control slowly came to an end on the Iberian Peninsula; the major milestone coming in 1415 when Christians captured the Moroccan port of **Ceuta**. This reversed, for the first time in seven hundred years, the direction of conquest from Africa to Europe and marked the beginning of increasing interaction between the two continents.

Religion generally provided the context for other contacts between Africans and Europeans. In a number of instances Africans, specifically Ethiopians, initiated contact with Europe. Ethiopia, a Christian kingdom under the rule of Amda Siyon (r. 1313-1344), established relations with the West through the Roman Catholic Church. What westerners learned about Ethiopia through the church as well as monks in Jerusalem convinced some Europeans that Ethiopia descended from the legendary Christian kingdom of **Prester John** (Priest John). Because Amda Siyon waged war against Muslims in eastern Africa, the Coptic Church created the second connection with European Christians. In the mid-fifteenth century, King Zera Yakob (r. 1434-1468) defeated his strongest rival, the Muslim sultanate of Adal in 1445. Adal opposed Ethiopia for nearly two hundred years, preventing expansion by the Christian state and control of trade near the Red Sea. The Portuguese in particular tried very hard to reach Ethiopia. In 1487, Pero de Covilha left Portugal in search of the legendary kingdom. He spent seven years collecting information about the land of Prester John of the Indies. In 1512, Ethiopian Empress Elina sent an envoy to Portugal in the hopes of forging an alliance with Portugal. The Portuguese response did not arrive until 1520; by that time the King Lebna replaced his mother,

Elina and refused Portuguese help against his Muslim rivals. This was an unwise move, as Muslim forces from Adal defeated Ethiopia in 1529 at the Battle of Shimbira Kure.

Globalization 1

Several factors motivated Europeans to both explore and expand in the 15th century. Once that decision had been made, the Portuguese began exploring Africa from its strongholds in modern-day Morocco. It is important to note that early Portuguese forays into Africa were commercial in nature; little desire existed to control the continent or penetrate the African interior (which was not realistic for Portugal anyway because its population was so small). African contact with Europeans had other similarities with Asia. The order of European contact was the same—Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French. The biggest difference between Africa and Asia in early contact was the content of trade.

The Portuguese in Africa

European expansion and the first phase of globalization marked a significant transition in African history. With the coming of Europeans, a new source for African history came into being—written evidence. Portugal's **Prince Henry** (1394-1460, aka "the Navigator") sponsored expeditions along Africa's western coast beginning in 1418. Explorers searched for the goldfields of West Africa (the legend of Mansa Musa returns). Henry also gave standing orders for captains to obtain, by force if necessary, Africans who could be interrogated and taught Portuguese so that they could learn about their country (Columbus did the same thing in 1492 with Native Americans). By the 1440s, these **grumetes** (Portuguese term for these African interpreters/captives) sailed frequently with the Portuguese and assisted in the construction of trading posts along the coast. The first was constructed in 1448 on Arguim Island off the coast of Mauritania. From here the Portuguese established profitable trading contacts with Arabs and nomadic traders (**Tuareg**). By the 1460s, small-scale slave trading was underway with 1,000 slaves taken annually by the Portuguese. It is very important to note, however, the Portuguese were NOT raiding for slaves in the fifteenth century; they tapped into an existing internal slave trade. While the Portuguese made slow, steady progress along the African coast, the relationship with Africans seems less significant especially after Columbus's American discovery shifted the focus of much of Europe away from the continent. However, the Portuguese did have a policy regarding Africans. The Portuguese focused on areas that produced specialized goods that furthered their trading empire or areas that showed sufficient political organization to make it worthwhile to be a satellite (tributary) member of Portugal's growing empire.

Contrary to popular myth, slaves were not the commodity the Portuguese wanted to realize their ambitions. It was **GOLD!** In 1472, the Portuguese brought back gold from tropical Africa. This provided the foundation for one of the most important trading posts—**Elmina** (Portuguese for "the mine"). The Portuguese tapped into the foremost source of gold in West Africa. An agent was dispatched to build a fort (with local permission from Caramansa—who this person was remains unknown, but he clearly wanted to trade with the Portuguese). Official accounts note the Portuguese taking 8,000 ounces of gold annually from Elmina by 1489. The biggest problem for the Portuguese was finding a commodity that they could trade for the gold.

Trading weapons was prohibited by the Pope, so the Portuguese turned to another commodity easily purchased and in demand, slaves. Slaves were in great demand and the Portuguese began trading slaves along the coast, acquiring slaves on one part of the coast and carrying them to the gold coast (Elmina) to trade for the gold they wanted. Many of these early slaves came from the areas of current Benin and Nigeria. Records exist for only a portion of this trade (1500-1535), but Portuguese traders transported some 10,000 to 12,000 slaves from the Slave Coast to the gold coast. The shifting of trade networks toward coastal trading posts and the arrival of other Europeans profoundly affected the Atlantic side of the continent. Shifting trade patterns indirectly caused the collapse of West African kingdoms such as Songhai in the late sixteenth century. The collapse of Songhai and the growing wealth of the coastal trade with Europeans stimulated the movement of inland peoples and the emergence of new states within the forest zone.

The Portuguese continued to establish posts farther east and south at Fernando Po, Principe, and Sao Tome in the Gulf of Guinea (the region of present day Nigeria and Cameroon). As they moved into Central Africa, they found strong kingdoms that emerged a century before their arrival. Introduction to the commerce of the Atlantic community drastically changed these kingdoms. The kingdom of **Kongo** illustrates the process. Kongo's economic prosperity depended on its control of Pool Malebo, a major trading junction in the lower Congo River. By controlling the pool, Kongo dominated river and regional interior trade. Portuguese explorers first visited Kongo in the 1480s and found a capital city with a population of between 10,000 and 15,000 people. Kongo also had manufacturing ability, producing both iron and raffia cloth. Additional Portuguese emissaries and missionaries arrived in the 1490s and quickly involved themselves in Kongo's internal struggles for expansion. Part of the reason the Portuguese did so was the development of sugar plantations along the coast (these plantation systems will eventually become the model for Caribbean sugar production). The king of Kongo welcomed the Portuguese: their presence offered a technological advantage over his rivals. As part of the alliance, the king of Kongo converted to Christianity. Kongolese Christianity never really became a "religion of the masses," but it connected the royal family to Portugal, making it an exception to early European-African relations. The king's actions proved detrimental as the Portuguese continually interfered in Kongo's dynastic struggles and interior. By the mid-16th century, Portugal's purpose had been transformed; its economic objective was acquiring slaves for their plantations on São Tomé and later Brazil. Kongo waged war against rebellious provinces to meet the need for slaves. Uninterested in the stability of Kongo, the Portuguese eventually provoked a rebellion that led to a civil war, which, for all practical purposes, destroyed the kingdom in the 1660s and 1670s. The resulting conflict ensured a steady supply of slaves. North of the Congo River, the English, Dutch, and French began trading African captives, which stimulated even more conflict in the region. The impact of the Atlantic slave trade was deeper and longer felt in this area than in any other part of the continent. By the eighteenth century the slave-raiding frontier stretched far into the heart of West and Central Africa.

Southern Africa

The Portuguese did not bring southern Africa into the emerging modern world system developing in the fifteenth century, though they reached the Cape of Good Hope first.

Bartholomeu Dias and his crew landed long enough in 1488 to erect a marker of Portuguese claim, and then turned back for home. Vasco da Gama followed up his efforts, though his mission was reaching India. What ultimately made southern Africa an exception in European exploration was the settlement of Dutch at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. The Dutch entered the Indian Ocean in 1595. The creation of the Dutch East India Company in 1602 profoundly impacted the Portuguese and changed the course of history in southern Africa. Failing to take the Portuguese base on Mozambique Island, the Dutch established a weigh-station for east-west shipping in southern Africa. **Jan van Riebeeck** landed with orders to grow vegetables and provide meat for crews returning from the East. The settlers nearly starved. The company decided to farm large scale in 1657, but to do so required labor. As Dutch farmers adapted to the environment, they either drove out the indigenous inhabitants or, when necessary, enslaved them.

East Africa and Europeans

In December 1497, Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and turned northwest exploring the eastern coast of Africa. He hoped to be the first European to visit India by sea. He stumbled across a civilization not seen by any European before. He saw city after city, wealthy and comfortable, with tall ships and a thriving trade in gold and ivory. He had reached the Swahili trading states. His arrival, like the first in West Africa, made little impact, but the small stream of traders who followed would. Among the most important observations made by da Gama was the fact that gold could be purchased cheaply and sold again in India. East Africa had been the principal source of gold for much of Asia and Arabia for centuries. Vasco da Gama purpose remained reaching Asia. Portuguese agents who followed him, however, attempted to seize the Swahili states. The Portuguese adopted the tactic of sailing heavily armed ships into the harbors and demanding annual tribute from each Swahili city. Vasco da Gama returned in July of 1502 with twenty ships and forced Kilwa to promise tribute. The island of Zanzibar came under attack in 1503. Da Gama also demonstrated his notion of holy war. During his second voyage along the coast of East Africa, he encountered a shipload of 380 pilgrims (men, women, and children). He blew up the ship with everyone aboard.

Other Portuguese agents carried out similar depredations in East Africa and the larger Indian Ocean community to ill-effect. While the Portuguese did manage to establish control over some regions, their efforts to monopolize trade in the region backfired. By waging war against Arab traders and Swahili states, the long-term impact was a decline in Western Indian Ocean trade. On the African end of the trade, they disrupted the internal trade as far inland as they were able to reach. In India, the result was much the same. Finally, the crushing blow to the Indian Ocean trade came when the Portuguese attacked any vessels not flying their flag. Making Portuguese actions even more incomprehensible is the fact that they did not even succeed in gaining much gold from the places they conquered. Portugal faced a number of challengers to its African empire. The city-states combined to resist the Portuguese periodically toward the end of the sixteenth century. A Turkish adventurer/pirate, **Amir Ali Bey**, came to the coast in 1585 claiming to represent the Sultan of Turkey. He attempted to unite the Swahili states against Portugal; unfortunately for him, only Mombasa joined him. The Portuguese sent a fleet to punish the coastal cities, massacring as many as 2000 people. A large Portuguese fleet captured Mombasa and Amir Ali Bey in 1588. He was sent to Lisbon where he converted

to Christianity, thus saving his life. Mombasa faced permanent occupation for its role in challenging the Portuguese. The Portuguese constructed Ft. Jesus there in 1593, one of the few strongholds that held Portugal as a presence in the Indian Ocean until the Dutch supplanted Portuguese supremacy in the area.

Further Reading:

Have a look at the great web resources on Sub-Saharan Africa compiled by the Library at Stanford University, located at <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/guide.html>.