

### External Trade in African History

Throughout African history external trade has played a big part in contributing to the development of African civilizations. When looking at the history of Africa's external trade, we can break it down to economic, social, and political effects. In this essay we will take a closer look at these three subsections of the vast history that Africa has to offer.

When looking at the economic aspect of Africa's external trade history, they were a hotspot for all things trade because of their wealth of natural resources such as gold and ivory. This was very prevalent in the Trans-Saharan trade route. <sup>1</sup>The Trans-Saharan trade route was able to connect the west and north Africa along with having influence on the mediterranean trade area. With all this trade going on it prompted trade empires to pop up such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. Each of these empires had control of the Trans-Saharan trade route at different times of history because of the high demand in foreign nations for natural resources. The Trans-Saharan trade route and external trade allowed these empires along with others to prosper and grow. <sup>2</sup>We can also take a look at the Swahili coast to get a better understanding on how external trade affected the economic development of African civilizations. The Swahili coast is interesting because unlike other nations they specialized in specific goods such as spices, ivory, and slaves in the Indian Ocean trade route. However The Swahili coast wasn't limited to these goods because they also acted as the middle person for the African interior. The Indian Ocean trade route was able to connect Africa to the Arab and Asian worlds. <sup>3</sup>External trade also brought a negative impact on African civilization such as exploitation of resources and labor that

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<sup>1</sup> Falola; Stapleton, A History of Africa, 87-90.

<sup>2</sup> Falola; Stapleton, A History of Africa, 145-151.

<sup>3</sup> Falola; Stapleton, A History of Africa, E-1.

### External Trade in African History

ultimately led to the destruction of local African economies. Due to these negative impacts, Africa's current economic state is left up in the air because of its external trade past.

When looking at the social aspect of Africa's external trade history, we can see that trade allowed for the exchanging and blending of cultures from different parts of the world.<sup>4</sup>For an example we can go back to the Swahili coast and why the primary religion in the area is islam. With The Swahili coast being a trading hub for the Indian Ocean trade route, it allowed for Arab ideologies to mesh with East African customs. This was beneficial for development of both nations because it made a common identity for consistent business practices such as bookkeeping and transparent communication. External trade also brought up the idea of social hierarchies because the people controlling the trade and resources had power over those who did not. This would go on to affect people's way of living and create new economic based subcultures within Africa. In the modern day Africa still has to face stereotyping that hinders people's view of Africa but there has been an increase in trying to preserve African culture.

When looking at the political aspect of Africa's external trade history, we can see it's closely related to the economic aspect because they go hand and hand.<sup>5</sup>The empires who controlled the trade routes, such as the Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trade route, had political power because of their capability to tax people for their goods. Taxation allowed empires to accumulate wealth and this meant they were able to build up armies and a form of government. When looking at the Trans-Saharan area we see things aren't that simple because it would cause political conflict to see who could rise to power and this would lay the foundation for the modern boards of countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Falola; Stapleton, A History of Africa, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Falola; Stapleton, A History of Africa, 95.

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12/4/2023

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In the end we know that external trade benefited development of some African empires in the past but we have to ask if that outweighs the modern problems Africa has to face. With political turmoil, poverty, social stigmatism, and other issues it's up for the next generation to find a way to move away from Africa's old habits to prosper once again.