

Developments In Africa

After that the chief of the poets mounts the steps of the pempi [a raised platform on which the ruler sits] and lays his head on the sultan's lap, then climbs to the top of the pempi and lays his head first on the sultan's right shoulder and then on his left, speaking all the while in their tongue, and finally he comes down again. I was told that this practice is a very old custom amongst them, prior to the introduction of Islam, and that they have kept it up.

—Ibn Battuta, c. 1352

Essential Question: How and why did states develop in Africa and change over time?

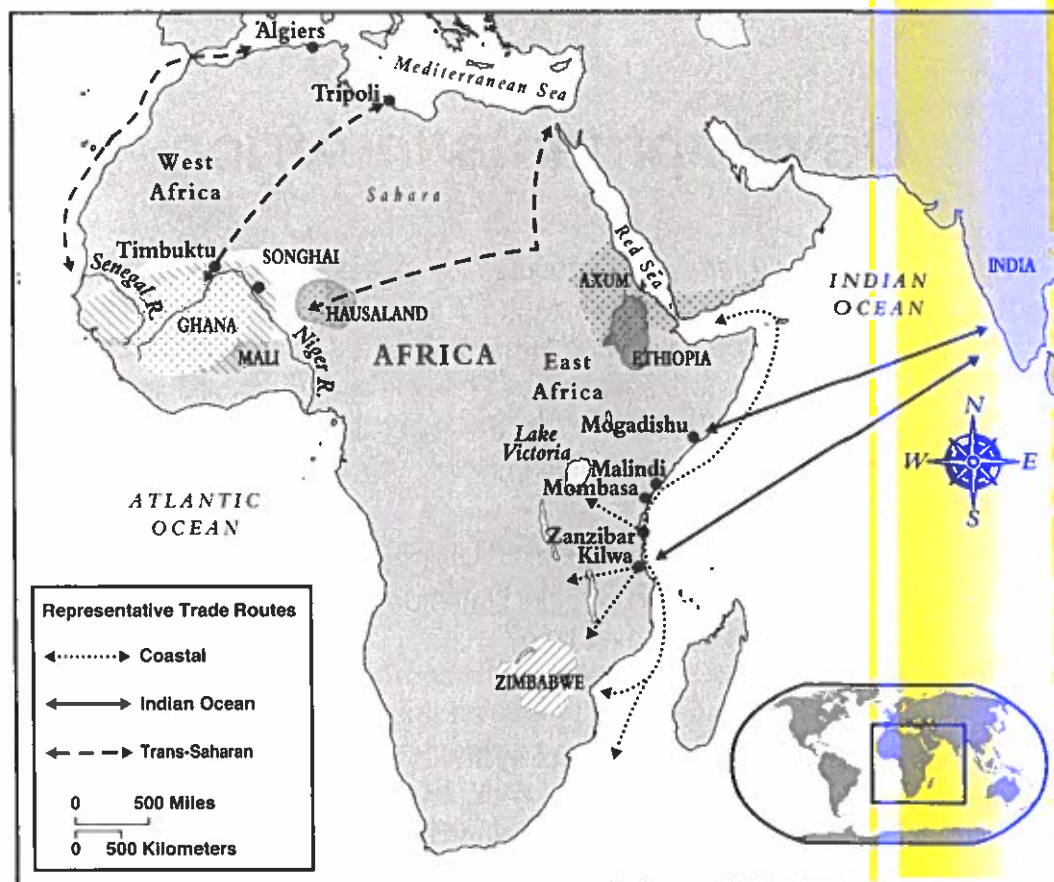
Ibn Battuta's commentary on Mali society sheds light on the cultural forces at work in Sub-Saharan Africa during the 14th century. A scholar from Morocco on the northwest coast of Africa, he was well versed in Islamic law, also known as shariah. Islamic governments in Mogadishu (east Africa) and Delhi (India) sought his advice and welcomed him to their lands. Ibn Battuta's travelogue demonstrated how Islam's phenomenal growth increased connections among cultures of Asia, Africa, and southern Europe. As Ibn Battuta's account makes clear, African societies that had adopted Islam kept many of their traditions.

Some parts of Africa resisted Islam. To better defend themselves against attacks by Islamic forces, they built churches with labyrinths, reservoirs, and tunnels. Other parts of the continent, especially in the south, had little contact with Islam until later in history.

Political Structures in Inland Africa

The development of Sub-Saharan Africa was heavily shaped by the migrations of Bantu-speaking people outward from west-central Africa. By the year 1000, most of the region had adopted agriculture. With the sedentary nature of agriculture, people needed more complex political relationships to govern themselves. In contrast to most Asian or European societies, those in Sub-Saharan Africa did not centralize power under one leader or central government. Instead, communities formed **kin-based networks**, where families governed themselves. A male head of the network, a **chief**, mediated conflicts and dealt with neighboring groups. Groups of villages became districts, and a group of chiefs decided among themselves how to solve the district's problems.

Early State-Building and Trade in Africa



As populations grew, kin-based networks became more difficult to govern. Competition among neighbors increased, which in turn increased fighting among villages and districts. Survival for small kin-based communities became more challenging. Though many such communities continued to exist in Sub-Saharan Africa until the 19th century, larger kingdoms grew in prominence, particularly after 1000.

The Hausa Kingdoms Sometime before 1000, in what is now Nigeria, people of the Hausa ethnic group formed seven states, the **Hausa Kingdoms**. The states were loosely connected through kinship ties, though they too had no central authority. People established prospering city-states, each with a speciality. For example, several were situated in plains where cotton grew well.

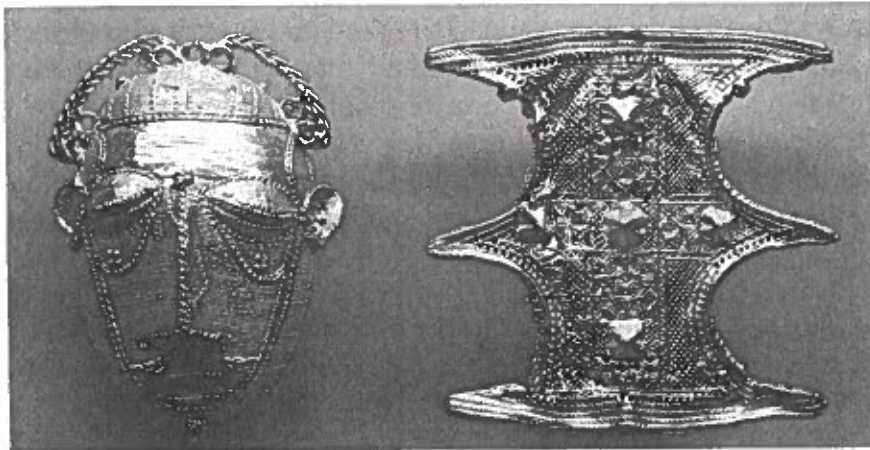
Though the region lacked access to the sea, contact with people from outside the region was important. Many Hausa benefited from the thriving **trans-Saharan trade**, a network of trading routes across the great desert. A state on the western edge of the region specialized in military matters and defended the states against attack. Because the states lacked a central authority, however, they were frequently subject to domination from outside. In the 14th century, missionaries introduced Islam to the region. (Connect:

Write a paragraph contrasting the decentralized political systems of the peoples in Inland Africa with those of the Inca. See Topic 1.4.)

Political Structures of West and East Africa

Kingdoms on both the western and eastern sides of Africa benefited from increased trade. The exchange of goods brought them wealth, political power, and cultural diversity. The spread of Islam added to the religious diversity of the continent, where animism and Christianity were already practiced. Four of these kingdoms were Ghana, Mali, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia.

Ghana Nestled between the Sahara and the tropical rain forests of the West African coast, the kingdom of **Ghana** was not in the same location as the modern nation of Ghana. Historians believe that the kingdom had been founded during the 5th century, at least two centuries before the time of Muhammad, but Ghana reached its peak of influence from the 8th to the 11th centuries. Ghana's rulers sold gold and ivory to Muslim traders in exchange for salt, copper, cloth, and tools. From Ghana's capital city, Koumbi Saleh, the king ruled a centralized government aided by nobles and an army equipped with iron weapons.



Source: Daderot / Wikimedia Commons



Source: Thinkstock

The gold artifacts (upper) were part of the valuable trans-Saharan trade in West Africa. The modern photo of foods and spices (lower) shows the types of goods that have been popular in the Indian Ocean trade in East Africa since the 8th century C.E.

Mali By the 12th century, wars with neighboring societies had permanently weakened the Ghanaian state. In its place arose several new trading societies, the most powerful of which was **Mali**. You will read more about Mali in Topic 2.4. Most scholars believe that Mali's founding ruler, Sundiata, was a Muslim and used his connections with others of his faith to establish trade relationships with North African and Arab merchants. Sundiata cultivated a thriving gold trade in Mali. Under his steady leadership, Mali's wealth grew tremendously. His nephew, Mansa Musa, made a pilgrimage to Mecca where his lavish displays of gold left a lasting impression. (See Topic 2.4 for the later developments in West Africa, such as the growth of the city of Timbuktu and the Songhai Empire.)

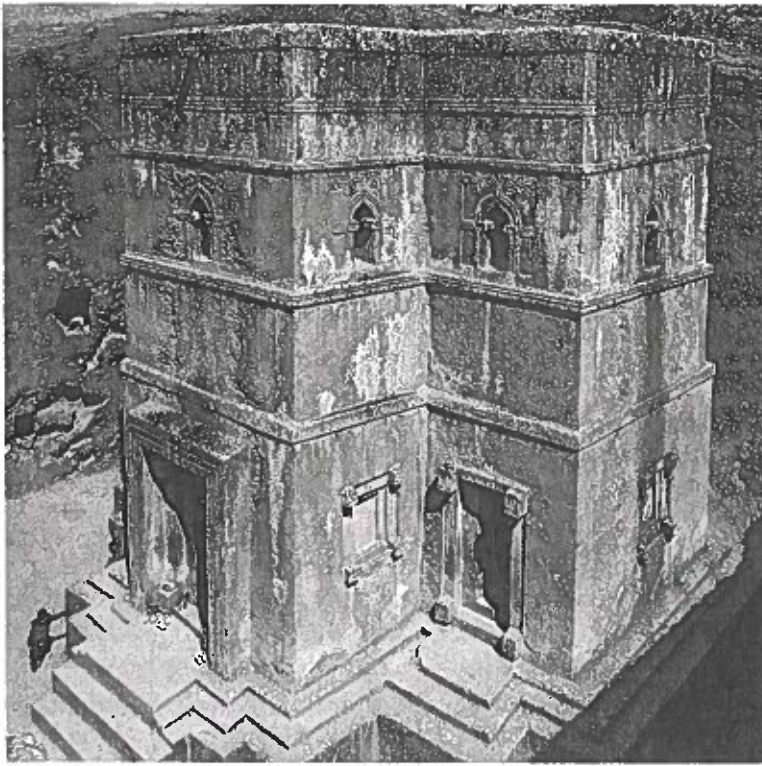
Zimbabwe In East Africa, the architecture demonstrated the growing wealth of one kingdom. Though most houses had traditionally been constructed from wood, by the 9th century chiefs had begun to construct their "zimbabwes," the Bantu word for "dwellings," with stone. This word became the name of one of the most powerful of all the East African kingdoms between the 12th and 15th centuries—**Zimbabwe**. It was situated between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers in modern-day Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Zimbabwe built its prosperity on a mixture of agriculture, grazing, trade, and, above all, gold. Like Ghana and Mali on the other side of the continent, Zimbabwe had rich gold fields, and taxes on the transport of gold made the kingdom wealthy. While Ghana and Mali relied on land-based trade across the Sahara, Zimbabwe traded with the coastal city-states such as Mombasa, Kilwa, and Mogadishu. Through these ports, Zimbabwe was tied into the **Indian Ocean trade**, which connected East Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. In East Africa, traders blended Bantu and Arabic to develop a new language, **Swahili**. Today, Swahili is spoken by various groups in the African Great Lakes region as well as other parts of Southeast Africa.

The rise and decline of Zimbabwe was reflected in the defensive walls used to protect cities. By the end of the 13th century, a massive wall of stone, 30 feet tall by 15 feet thick, surrounded the capital city, which became known as the **Great Zimbabwe**. The stone wall was the first large one on the continent that people built without mortar. Inside the wall, most of the royal city's buildings were made of stone. In the late 15th century, nearly 20,000 people resided within the Great Zimbabwe. However, overgrazing so damaged the surrounding environment that residents of the bustling capital city abandoned it by the end of the 1400s. The wall still stands in the modern country of Zimbabwe.

Ethiopia Christianity had spread from its origins along the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea south into Egypt and beyond. In what is today **Ethiopia**, the kingdom of Axum developed. It prospered by trading goods obtained from India, Arabia, the Roman Empire, and the interior of Africa. Beginning in the 7th century, the spread of Islam made the region more diverse religiously.

In the 12th century, a new Christian-led kingdom in Ethiopia emerged. Its rulers, like those of other countries, expressed their power through architecture. They ordered the creation of 11 massive churches made entirely of rock.



Source: Thinkstock

This is one of the 11 Christian churches in Ethiopia built out of rock.

Carved rock structures had been a feature of Ethiopian religious architecture since the 2nd millennium B.C.E.

From the 12th through the 16th centuries, Ethiopia was an island of Christianity on the continent of Africa. Separated from both the Roman Catholic Church of western Europe and the Orthodox Church of eastern Europe, Ethiopian Christianity developed independently. People combined their traditional faith traditions, such as ancestor veneration and beliefs in spirits, with Christianity to create a distinct form of faith.

Social Structures of Sub-Saharan Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa, strong central governments ruling over large territories were uncommon. Instead, Sub-Saharan Africa's small communities were organized around several structures: kinship, age, and gender. Kinship connections allowed people to identify first as members of a clan or family. Age was another significant social marker. An 18-year-old could do more hard labor than a 60-year-old, but younger people often relied on the advice of their elders. Thus, communities divided work according to age, creating age grades or age sets. Finally, gender had an influential role in social organization.

- Men dominated most activities that required a specialized skill. For example, leather tanners and blacksmiths were typically men.

- Women generally engaged in agriculture and food gathering. They also took the primary responsibilities for carrying out domestic chores and raising their family's children.

Slavery in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southwest Asia Slavery had a long history in Africa. Prisoners of war, debtors, and criminals were often enslaved. Most men and some women did agricultural work. Most women and some men served in households. In many kin-based societies, people could not own land privately, but they could own other people. Owning a large number of enslaved people increased one's social status. Slavery existed in many forms.

KEY TERMS

Comparing Three Forms of Slavery			
	Chattel	Domestic	Debt Bondage
Description	People were the legal property of the owner.	People served as cooks, cleaners, or other household workers.	People became enslaved, sometimes through mutual agreement, to repay a debt.
Examples	Common in the Americas, 16th century to 19th century	Common in Classical Greece and Rome, and in the Middle East	Common in East Africa before the 15th century and in European colonies in the Americas
Was enslavement permanent?	Yes	Often	Not in theory, but it often happened in practice
Were the children of enslaved people automatically enslaved?	Yes	Often	Children often inherited the debts of their parents
Did enslaved people have any rights?	No	Some: laws or customs might prevent a master from selling a person	Some: laws or customs might limit how severely a master could punish a person

A strong demand in the Middle East for enslaved workers resulted in an **Indian Ocean slave trade** between East Africa and the Middle East. This trade started several centuries before the Atlantic Ocean slave trade between West Africa and the Americas. In some places, it lasted into the 20th century.

The enslaved East Africans, known in Arabic as *zanj*, provided valuable labor on sugar plantations in Mesopotamia. However, between 869 and 883, they and many Arab workers mounted a series of revolts known as the **Zanj Rebellion**. About 15,000 enslaved people successfully captured the city of Basra and held it for ten years before being defeated. The large size and long length of time before it was defeated make the Zanj Rebellion one of the most successful slave revolts in history.

Cultural Life in Sub-Saharan Africa

Playing music, creating visual arts, and telling stories were and continue to be important aspects of cultures everywhere because they provided enjoyment and mark rituals such as weddings and funerals. In Africa, these activities carried additional significance. Because traditional African religions included ancestor veneration, song lyrics provided a means of communicating with the spirit world. African music usually had a distinctive rhythmic pattern, and vocals were interspersed with percussive elements such as handclaps, bells, pots, or gourds.

Visual arts also commonly served a religious purpose. For example, metalworkers created busts of past rulers so that ruling royalty could look to them for guidance. Artists in Benin, West Africa, were famous for their intricate sculptures in iron and bronze. In the late 19th century, the sophistication of these pieces of art would cause some Europeans to increase their respect for West African cultures.

Griots and Griottes Literature, as it existed in Sub-Saharan Africa, was oral. *Griots*, or storytellers, were the conduits of history for a community. Griots possessed encyclopedic knowledge of family lineages and the lives and deeds of great leaders. In general, griots were also adept at music, singing their stories and accompanying themselves on instruments, such as the drums and a 12-string harp called the kora.

The griots were both venerated and feared as they held both the power of language and of story. People said that a griot could sing your success or sing your downfall. By telling and retelling their stories and histories, the griots preserved a people's history and passed that history on from generation to generation. Kings often sought their counsel regarding political matters. When a griot died, it was as though a library had burned.

Just as men served as griots, women served as griottes. They would sing at special occasions, such as before a wedding. For example, the griotte would counsel the bride to not talk back if her mother-in-law abused her or reassure the bride that if things got too bad, she could return home. Griottes provided women with a sense of empowerment in a patriarchal society.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

SOCIETY: Sub-Saharan
kin-based networks
Swahili
Zanj Rebellion

ECONOMY: Trade
trans-Saharan trade
Indian Ocean trade
Indian Ocean slave trade

TECHNOLOGY: Building
Great Zimbabwe

GOVERNMENT: Kinship
chief
Hausa Kingdoms

GOVERNMENT: West
Africa
Ghana
Mali

GOVERNMENT: East
Africa
Zimbabwe
Ethiopia