**AFRICA: IN THE CONTEXT WORLD HISTORY: OUTLINE**

***African and the Rise of the Islamic World*: Islam’s rise from an unknown religion in Saudi Arabia in the 7th century (622 CE) and becoming a “world” religion, stretching from the banks of the river Ebro, Senegal and Niger in the West, to the Syr-Darya and Indus in the east, and from the Volta river to the East African coast within five centuries CE shaped the history of Africa in diverse ways. While Islam was no more a political unit, it had left a legacy of a homogenous culture and civilization with unlimited potential for creativity and expansion. It was no more an exclusive Arab religion—hence the “Islamic Age” in world history: NB: The term/label does not imply exclusive world domination/influence—rather it implied the creation/emergence of cultural zones, with Islam as the most progressive in several areas of world activity. Africa will now emerge as an “Islamic Cultural Zone.” NB: The Arabs invaded Egypt in 639 CE, Egypt was then ruled by the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium. Tired of corrupt, oppressive Byzantine rule, Egyptians welcomed the Arab invaders. Conquest of the coastal region of North Africa to the west of Egypt—known to the Arabs as *al-Maghreb* (‘the West’)—proved more difficult. North African Berbers did not readily welcome the Arabs. What is now known as Tunisia fell in 647 CE. The city of Kairouan was founded in order to govern the new Muslim Arab province that was named ‘Ifriqiya’—the name that will eventually be applied to the whole continent—AFRICA! *Arab Conquests of 7th-8th Centuries*: These Arab conquests produced two lasting historical/geographic effects in the world—(a) Creation of a new world state in the Mediterranean basin and the Near East, and (b) Development of a new world culture within the state. By the end of the 11th century we could talk of a transformation of this Arab empire into a “Muslim world” of the Middle Ages. Hence a creation of a new world culture—unsophisticated and simple from its desert home in Arabia. However, apart from religion they used their language—Arabic—as the main vehicle of administration, literature and science. Sub-Saharan Africa, however, would adopt the religion but not the language. The Arabic language managed to shape African languages, though, by creating two main hybrids: Kiswahili in East Africa, and Hausa in West Africa. NB: The word “Swahili”—is derived from the Arabic word *sahil*, meaning ‘coast’. It literally means ‘the people of the coast’ and today the “Swahili” language is the official language of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Another major contribution was the creation of urban life and economy. The economic boom that emerged in the 8th century was primarily fueled by the flow of precious metals to the central lands of the Near East. The world was let into an era of bimetallism—gold became dominant and was used besides silver. The Maghrib (NW Africa) and Muslim Spain which remained in the orbit of silver currency for lack of accessible gold mines began to taste a new era through the increase in gold imports from the western Sudan. Soon after this development the world was introduced to the “Almoravid Dinar” which soon became an internationally recognized currency.**

***The Muslim World’s* geographical location—very central—made it play the role of intermediary—a channel between all other regions of the Old World—Hence the side-by-side development of commercial commodities transported by land (across the Sahara desert) and sea routes—Red Sea, Mediterranean and Indian Oceans; and new concepts and ideas in innovation and technology: Example would be the origins of the paper industry: Originally a Chinese invention, it was introduced to the Muslim empire by Chinese prisoners of war who were brought to Smarkand (East Uzbekistan in SW Russia, north of Agfanistan)—in 751, where they taught paper-making technology to the Muslims—making Smarkand the first place in the Muslim world to have a paper industry. It then spread westwards to Muslim Spain by the first half of the 10th century. It was introduced into Catalonia (northern Spain) in the 12th century—making it the first European country to produce paper. Also the Indian invention of positional navigation (Arabic numerals) had already been adopted by the Muslims—they called it Indian numerals. This adoption paved the way for the evolution of algebra –which was to pave the way for the development of modern algebra.**

***The Islamic World and Africa:* Between the 7th and the end of the 11th centuries Egypt (Kemet) emerged from being a peripheral province of the Caliphate to become the core land in a new, Fatimid empire. It became the channel of trade and commerce between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and a major core of Arab cultural life. In the links with sub-Saharan Africa, it became the starting point for both the Arab conquerors and the Hilali invasions in the 7th and 11th centuries respectively. Arab Bedouins from Egypt penetrated Christian Nubia and eventually effected the Arabization of the Nilotc Sudan. Egypt lost its Christian character in the process, but the Alexandrian patriarchates survived and resourced the Monophysite churches of Nubia and Ethiopia (Now the Coptic/Orthodox churches in Egypt, Ethiopia and Eritrea). Egypt was also the final destination of black African slaves imported from Nubia, Ethiopia, and Western/Central Africa. (a) North Africa, with Egypt as center of operation, was central to Muslim political and economic life: The conquests of Spain and Cicily were launched from the Maghrib by the Berbers, (b) Berber traders carried not only material products through the trans-Saharan trade, but the first cry of Islam—“God Is Great”—was sounded by them. The Almoravids, an authentically Berber religious movement, caused the eventual decline and fall of the old Ghana Empire in 1076. Then came the rise of Mali, the first major Islamic empire in sub-Saharan Africa. It was founded by Sundiata Keita, who led a revolt against the rule of Sumanguru, ruler of the Sosso, and united the Malinke chiefdoms.**

***Mansa* (King) Kankam Musa’s reign (1312-1337) brought the attention of the medieval world to West Africa as a potential world economic zone. Specifically Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca brought Europe’s attention to the wealth of sub-Saharan Africa, and in 1339 Angelino Dulcert included `Rex Melly’ or King of Mali on his map of Africa. The Catalan map of Abraham Cresques of about 1375 shows `Mussa Melli’ seated on a gold throne, wearing a gold crown and describes him as `the richest and most noble in all the land’. The rise of West Africa as the economic, intellectual (Universities of Timbukttu and Sankore) and cultural lives saw the demise of Ethiopia as a center of activity and access to the Red Sea. Through trade and commerce Islam came to be incorporated into the African ways of life. In East Africa the growing demand for gold from Zimbabwe intensified the Indian Ocean commercial network.**

***Nubian Christian States: 543-1,500 CE:* The Kingdom of Kush collapsed in 350 BCE, splitting into three kingdoms, Noboatia, Makuria and Alwa. Makuria soon conquered Nobatia. Nobatian became the Christian kingdom of Nubia in 543 CE and Makura and Alwa followed quickly. It is believed that conversion was more for access to Egypt and the Mediterranean than spirituality. Churches and cathedrals were built but monastic life did not flourish in Nubia. Persian invaders of Egypt in 616 CE stopped on the Nubian border, but it cut off the Egypt-Nubian alliance and the supervision of the Nubian church by the patrarchate of Alexandra in 641 CE when Egypt came under Arab control. For seven centuries, Nubia and the Arabs adhered to a treaty—the *Baqt*—which recognized Christian Nubia—mainly because of the strength of the Nubian army. By 366 CE, however, following several skirmishes the Nubian kingdom declined and fell. Muslims now dominated and formed the seed of what is today the Sudan.**

***Medieval Europe and Africa:* From the European point of view, Africa became identified with the Muslim world, since it was from this region that the main incursions and invasions of Muslims occurred. Even in the period of intensive and extensive commercial contacts between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, Africa, for Europeans was still “Muslim Africa”—Hence Africa was identified with the arch-enemy of Christianity, and its inhabitants, irrespective of their color, were regarded and treated accordingly. Without direct contacts between Europe and Africa, the presumed identification of black Africans with Muslims fashioned the European image of them as the personification of sin, evil and inferiority. By the latter Middle Ages we see “Christian Europe’s” negative attitudes, prejudice and hostility towards African people of black skin emerging, attitudes which were later to be strengthened by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery generally.**

***Africa, Asia and the Indian Ocean:* The Indian Ocean, between the 7th and 11th centuries, became the arena in the inter-continental relations with regards to the steadily expanding Muslim commercial network that connected China, Indonesia, India and the East African coast with the Islamic core lands. Contrast to the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean can be said to have been an “ocean of peace.” There were rarely wars among people in these areas. However, there were areas known for their Arab slave trade trading activities—Island of Zanzibar—and large-scale piracy. However, these paled in comparison to the Mediterranean which was essentially fuelled by religious differences. In the second half of the 9th century Indian Ocean trade was severely affected by (a) The great Zandj revolt in the regions of lower Iraq and the Arab/Persian Gulf in the years 866-83, affected some commercial ports such as Basra, Ubulla, and Abadan; they were laid waste for lack of merchant capital, goods and ships. Also in 878 Indian Ocean trade was severely affected when the forces of the Chinese rebel Huan Ch’ao sacked Canton and massacred a huge number of foreign traders, mostly from Muslim countries. To what degree, then did the Chinese, for example participate in the relations in the Indian Ocean trade and what was their impact on Africa at this point in world history? Specifically what role did the Africans play in the Indian Ocean context?**

***Africa and China:* In ancient and medieval times, Chinese contacts with the other main areas of the “Old World”—India, Western Asia, and the Mediterranean lands—were established through the export trade. The most important commodity was silk and later chinaware. China possessed the technical knowledge as well as the means for long-distance sea voyages across the Indian Ocean during the T’ang dynasty (618-906), yet it did not employ its own ships for trade beyond the Malayan peninsula. The Chinese came to learn about the Indian Ocean trade through Arab, Persian and Indian intermediaries. Most of the accounts reaching China were drawn from Muslims, so they accordingly came to think of the Africans as being subjects of Muslim rulers, and Africa as part of the Arab empire. Among the African goods reaching China were ivory, ambergris, frankincense and myrrh, as well as the Zandj slaves. For a time it seemed as if the history of East Africa had been written in Chinese porcelain. The bulk of this commodity belongs to the period after the eleventh century, so are Chinese coins found on the coast. Exchanges between China and Africa were not direct but transmitted through the Muslim trade network in the Indian Ocean. *The Arrival of the Europeans and the Beginnings of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade:* Europeans were familiar with North Africa and the Arabs—Portugal and Spain were ruled by the ‘Moors’ at one point. Europeans believed those territories south of the Sahara were peopled by exotic and fierce people known as ‘Ethiopians’, a term first coined by the Greeks, meaning ‘people with burnt faces’]*Aithiops*-`burnt face’] It was the desire to expand the knowledge about these ‘Ethiopians’ and to discover a means to control the fantastically lucrative trade in spice, slaves and gold that drove Portugal’s Prince Henry ‘the Navigator’ (1394-1460) to encourage voyages of exploration by Portuguese vessels along the West African coast. Portugal believed that the wealth of the East would help it to defend itself against its powerful neighbor Spain. It also thought of the additional benefit of converting the peoples of West Africa to Christianity, and recruiting them to fight the relentless tide of Islam. A new type of ship, the round-bottomed caravel, allowed Portuguese sailors to negotiate the West African coast, and the first visit took place in 1422 when two captains brought back gold, salt and ten slaves as ‘gifts’ to the Portuguese royal house, the first of many such cargos. The next two stages in sub-Saharan African history were to follow: The trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonization.**

**[Compiled by E. Obiri Addo, Ph. D.]**