

# UNIT 5

## Peoples and States of Africa to 1500

### Introduction: Peoples and States of Africa to 1500

This unit focuses on the significant economic, cultural, social, and political developments in pre-colonial Africa. It explores the diversity of the African peoples, their languages, and the states that existed before the 16th century. Students will gain an understanding of the interconnections between African communities through trade, migration, and conflict, as well as the rise and fall of various empires. The role of Islam in the expansion of West African empires will also be discussed.

### Key Concepts and Terms

- **People**
- **State**
- **Pre-colonial**
- **Empire**

This unit will cover the linguistic classifications of the peoples of Africa and the rise and fall of states and empires across the continent.

### Languages and Peoples of Africa

Africa is a vast continent with a rich diversity of languages. Linguists estimate that over 1,000 diverse and interrelated languages are spoken across Africa. These languages are classified into four super-families:

1. **Afro-Asiatic:** Spoken in northern Africa, the Sahara, the Horn of Africa, and around Lake Chad. It includes six sub-groups: Berber, Chadic, Coptic (Ancient Egyptian), Cushitic, Omotic, and Semitic.
2. **Niger-Congo:** This is the largest super-family, covering much of West Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. It includes the Niger-Congo and Kordofanian branches. The Bantu languages, including Kiswahili, fall under this super-family.
3. **Nilo-Saharan:** The third largest super-family, divided into six subgroups, including Chari-Nile, Songhay, Saharan, Meban, Koman, and Fur.
4. **Khoisan:** This super-family includes the Khoikhoi and San languages spoken in and around the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa.

Not all languages spoken in Africa are native to the continent. Arabic was brought by Muslim Arabs between the 7th and 11th centuries, and European colonial powers later introduced their languages.

## States in North Africa

### A) Mamluk Egypt

The Mamluks, originally Turkish soldiers, gained power in Egypt and established their dynasty from 1250 to 1517. They expanded their rule into Palestine, Syria, Europe, and Asia. Despite their economic advancements, the Mamluk dynasty eventually declined due to corruption, agricultural decline, cattle plague, and drought. The Ottomans, using firearms, defeated the Mamluks in 1517 and occupied Egypt.

### B) The Funj Sultanate

The Funj Sultanate, established in 1504 in present-day Sudan, was founded by cattle-keeping nomads. Like the Mamluks, the Funj engaged in conflicts with Ethiopia over trade routes. King Susenyos of Ethiopia destroyed the Funj army around 1620, but the Sultanate continued until it was conquered by Muhammed Ali of Egypt in the 1820s.

## Spread of Islam and Its Impact in West Africa.

### Spread of Islam in West Africa:

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula in the early 7th century. Following its inception, the Muslim Arabs expanded their territory, conquering Egypt in 642 AD. Over the next few centuries, Islam spread across North Africa, reaching Morocco and even southern Spain by the end of the 7th century.

In the 11th century, a resurgence of Islam in North Africa brought about another wave of Arab immigration, which furthered the religion's spread into West Africa. Islam's arrival in West Africa significantly impacted the region's political, economic, and cultural landscape.

### Impact of Islam on West Africa:

**Trade Expansion:** Islam greatly promoted trade between West Africa and the Mediterranean. It facilitated the development and expansion of the Trans-Saharan Caravan trade, which enriched both West African and Muslim traders. Muslim merchants from North Africa settled in West African commercial centers, fostering economic growth.

**Cultural and Religious Integration:** Islam helped to unite diverse peoples across West Africa, promoting cultural understanding and cooperation. The religion's spread also introduced new political structures, where rulers combined religious authority with political power, enhancing their legitimacy and control.

**Rise of Empires:** The spread of Islam was closely tied to the rise of powerful West African empires. The religion's influence facilitated the creation of political structures that encouraged trade and wealth accumulation, contributing to the growth of empires like Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

### **Southern Africa: States and Societies**

In Southern Africa, the formation of states happened more gradually than in the northern parts of the continent. However, from the 11th century onwards, some regions saw the emergence of states from independent villages.

#### **A) Zimbabwe**

The Bantu-speaking Shona people founded Great Zimbabwe around AD 1000. Great Zimbabwe, known for its impressive stone houses and walls, became a central city in a prosperous African trading empire from the 11th to the 15th centuries. The economy of Great Zimbabwe was built on cattle husbandry, crop cultivation, and gold trade, particularly along the East African coast. This city maintained significant trade relations with Swahili states and was renowned for its gold mines. After 1450 AD, the Rozwi clan of the Shona people established the Mwene Mutapa Empire, which was later conquered by the Portuguese in the late 16th century.

#### **B) The Khoi-Khoi**

The Khoi-Khoi were initially hunters, but around 1000 AD, they transitioned to sheep and cattle breeding. By the 15th century, the Khoi-Khoi had expanded from present-day Botswana into southern Africa. However, their land was seized by Dutch settlers in the mid-17th century, forcing them into the Kalahari Desert. Europeans referred to them derogatorily as "Hottentots."

#### **C) The San**

The San, also called Bushmen by Europeans, originally inhabited regions of present-day Angola and Namibia. They lived as hunters and gatherers, using bows with poison-tipped arrows for hunting. The San were pushed into the Kalahari Desert by Dutch farmers, where they continued their hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They are known for their yellowish-brown skin, tightly coiled black hair, and the unique clicking sounds in their Khoisan languages.

### **Africa's Intra and Inter-continental Relations**

**Intra-continental relations** refer to interactions within the same continent, while **intercontinental relations** involve connections between different continents. Before the formal establishment of the Trans-Saharan trade route, people living north and south of the Sahara had irregular contact. This trade became more organized with the introduction of the camel, beginning regularly in the 4th century AD.

The Trans-Saharan trade was a major factor in developing robust economic and political systems on both sides of the Sahara. The spread of Islam further solidified relationships between North Africa and tropical Africa. Arab traders established connections with North and East African societies, facilitating the exchange of goods and ideas. European explorations eventually led to Africa's more extensive contact with the outside world, notably resulting in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

### **Trans-Saharan Trade**

The Trans-Saharan trade, which linked different regions of Africa, was a crucial network for the movement of goods, people, and ideas across the continent. While its exact origins are unknown, two major trade routes connected West and West-Central Africa with North Africa, linking ancient and medieval states. Another route crossed the central Sahara, connecting North Africa with the Kingdom of Kanem and a sub-branch with Egypt.

Key trade items included gold from West Africa, salt from Northwest Africa, and enslaved people, especially after the rise of the Arabs in the 7th century AD. The trade helped develop strong empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, which controlled these routes. Additionally, the trade routes facilitated the spread of Islam and the Islamization of West and West-Central Africa.

### **Early Contacts with the Outside World**

Due to the strategic location of the East African coast, there were extensive interactions between Africans and people from other parts of the world. Early contacts were primarily with Arabs, Greeks, Persians, Romans, Chinese, Indians, Spaniards, and Portuguese.

European perceptions of Africa were often negative, portraying it as the opposite of Europe to justify European superiority. From the mid-15th century, European powers like Portugal and Spain, eager to dominate international trade, sponsored navigators and established closer ties with Africa. These contacts profoundly impacted Africa's economy, culture, language, politics, and environment, eventually leading to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Africa, a continent of diverse languages and cultures, saw the rise and fall of numerous states and empires before 1500 AD. The spread of Islam and Christianity significantly influenced Africa's relations with the outside world. By the 16th century, many African kingdoms and empires had declined, coinciding with the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.