

UNIT FIVE

PEOPLES AND STATES OF AFRICA TO 1500

Ancient and Medieval African States: Language and Cultural Influence

Africa is recognized as the cradle of humankind, with its diverse cultures and civilizations having a significant impact on the ancient and medieval world. This continent boasts a rich linguistic tapestry and a history of influential states and empires. This note explores the diverse African languages, the rise of significant African states, and their interactions with the broader world.

African Languages: Classification and Distribution

1. Linguistic Diversity: Africa is home to between 1,000 and 2,000 languages, representing about one-third of the world's total languages. Languages are categorized into four major families:

- **Niger-Congo Languages:** The largest language family in Africa. It includes Bantu languages, which are predominantly spoken in southern Africa. Notable languages include Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu.
- **Afro-Asiatic Languages:** Includes around 200-300 languages. Major languages include Arabic, spoken in North Africa, and Amharic in Ethiopia.
- **Nilo-Saharan Languages:** About 80 languages are spoken in regions of central, eastern, and northeastern Africa. Examples include Dholuo and Zarma.
- **Khoisan Languages:** Comprising 40-70 languages, primarily found in southern Africa, such as the Hadza and Naro languages.

Ancient and Medieval African States

2. North Africa: The Mamluk Period

The Mamluks, originally Turkish slaves, ruled Egypt from 1250 to 1517. They established their control after defeating the Crusaders and the Mongols. Their rule was marked by economic prosperity, driven by the Trans-Saharan trade and the Spice Trade. The Mamluks are remembered for their architectural contributions and military successes. However, their dominance ended with the Ottoman Turks' conquest in 1517.

3. Spread of Islam in North Africa

The Almoravid and Almohad movements played significant roles in the spread of Islam in North Africa. The Almoravids, founded in the 11th century, established their rule over much of North Africa and Spain before being replaced by the Almohads in the 12th century. The Almohads, founded by Ibn Tumart, expanded their influence across the Maghreb and Spain. Their power waned by the 13th century due to internal divisions and external pressures.

4. States in West Africa

- **Empire of Ghana:** Founded by the Soninke people around the 4th century, the Empire of Ghana reached its zenith by 1000 AD. Its strategic location on the Trans-Saharan trade routes facilitated its wealth and power. The empire declined in the 11th century due to attacks by the Almoravids.
- **Empire of Mali:** Established by Sundiata Keita in 1235, the Empire of Mali thrived under Mansa Musa (reigned 1312-1337), who is renowned for his pilgrimage to Mecca and the empire's wealth. After Mansa Musa's death, Mali faced internal strife and external attacks, leading to its gradual decline.
- **Empire of Songhai:** Emerging from the decline of Mali, Songhai was established by Sunni Ali in the 15th century. The empire reached its height under Askia Muhammad, who expanded its territory and fostered Islamic scholarship. The empire fell to Moroccan invaders in 1591.
- **Empire of Kanem-Bornu:** This trading empire, established around Lake Chad, was ruled by the Saifuwa dynasty from the 9th to the 19th century. Its prosperity was based on the Trans-Saharan trade. The empire saw periods of expansion and decline before its absorption by the Wadai kingdom in 1846.

5. Hausa City-States

The Hausa city-states in Northern Nigeria, including Daura, Kano, and Katsina, emerged around 1000 AD. They flourished as trade centers along the Trans-Saharan trade routes, dealing in goods such as gold, salt, and slaves. By the 15th century, these city-states had become influential in Islamic culture. They eventually fell under the control of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804.

In summary, Africa's ancient and medieval states were characterized by a rich tapestry of languages and cultures. These societies not only influenced each other but also made significant contributions to global trade, culture, and politics.

Spread of Islam in West Africa

Introduction

The spread of Islam in West Africa was a gradual process that began in the 8th century and became more significant over the subsequent centuries. Understanding this spread involves examining the role of trade, influential dynasties, and key figures who helped establish Islam in the region.

Early Influence through Trade

Islam initially spread into West Africa primarily through trade. North African Muslim traders played a crucial role by intensifying the Trans-Saharan trade routes. These routes connected West Africa with the Mediterranean and the Middle East, facilitating not only the exchange of goods but also the introduction of Islamic culture and religion. Key trade routes included:

- **Sijilmasa to Awdaghust**
- **Ghadames to Gao**

Trade centers along these routes became hubs of Islamic learning and civilization.

Islam in Early West African Kingdoms

1. **Kingdom of Tekrur:**
 - **Period:** By 850 A.D.
 - **Dynasty:** Dya'ogo dynasty
 - **Significance:** Tekrur was one of the first West African kingdoms to embrace Islam. The acceptance of Islam by the Dya'ogo dynasty introduced Islamic law and practices to the region.
2. **Empire of Ghana:**
 - **Period:** 11th century A.D.
 - **Significance:** Islam reached the Empire of Ghana, influencing its culture and administration.
3. **Empire of Mali:**
 - **Period:** 14th century A.D.
 - **Notable Figure:** Mansa Musa (1312-1337)
 - **Significance:** Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim who made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. His pilgrimage and the establishment of mosques significantly boosted the prominence of Islam in Mali. He is remembered for his contributions to Islamic scholarship and architecture in West Africa.

Establishment in Major Areas

- By the 14th century, Islam was firmly established in the territories of the Hausa city-states in what is now Northern Nigeria.
- Between the 8th and 14th centuries, Islam spread and became well-integrated into the political, social, and cultural fabric of West African empires and city-states.

Summary

The spread of Islam in West Africa was influenced significantly by trade and was reinforced by the adoption of Islam by influential local rulers and dynasties. Over time, Islam became a major religious and cultural force in the region, shaping its history and development.

East Coast of Africa and Islam

Introduction

The spread of Islam to the East Coast of Africa was facilitated by maritime trade and cultural interactions with the Indian Ocean region.

Maritime Trade and Swahili Coast

- **Geography:** The Swahili Coast stretched from Somalia to Mozambique, and its strategic location along major trade routes facilitated interactions with traders from the Indian Ocean world.
- **Trade Goods:** The region was known for trading ivory, rhino horn, tortoise shell, and palm oil. Swahili city-states became wealthy through these trade interactions.

Swahili Coast and Islamic Influence

1. **Early Settlements:**
 - **Key Cities:** Shungwaya, Malindi, Gedi, Mombasa
 - **Language and Culture:** Swahili, a Bantu language with significant Arabic influence, emerged. The Swahili Coast was home to a mix of African, Arab, and Indian Ocean cultures.
2. **Medieval Period:**
 - **12th Century:** Persian settlers known as Shirazi arrived, further influencing the culture and spreading Islam.

- **Trade Network:** The Swahili Coast was connected to trade networks stretching across the Indian Ocean, including interactions with China and the Portuguese.

Decline and Legacy

- **Portuguese Influence:** The arrival of Portuguese explorers in the late 15th century disrupted trade and led to the decline of the Swahili city-states.
- **Modern Impact:** Swahili remains a widely spoken language in East Africa, reflecting the enduring influence of Islamic culture.

Summary

Islam spread to the East Coast of Africa through maritime trade and cultural exchange. The Swahili Coast, with its rich trade network and cultural blending, became a center of Islamic influence in the region.

Conclusion

The spread of Islam across Africa was shaped by trade, cultural exchanges, and influential leaders. In both West and East Africa, Islam became deeply integrated into local cultures, influencing the region's historical development.