Chapter 7

African Civilizations and the Spread of Islam

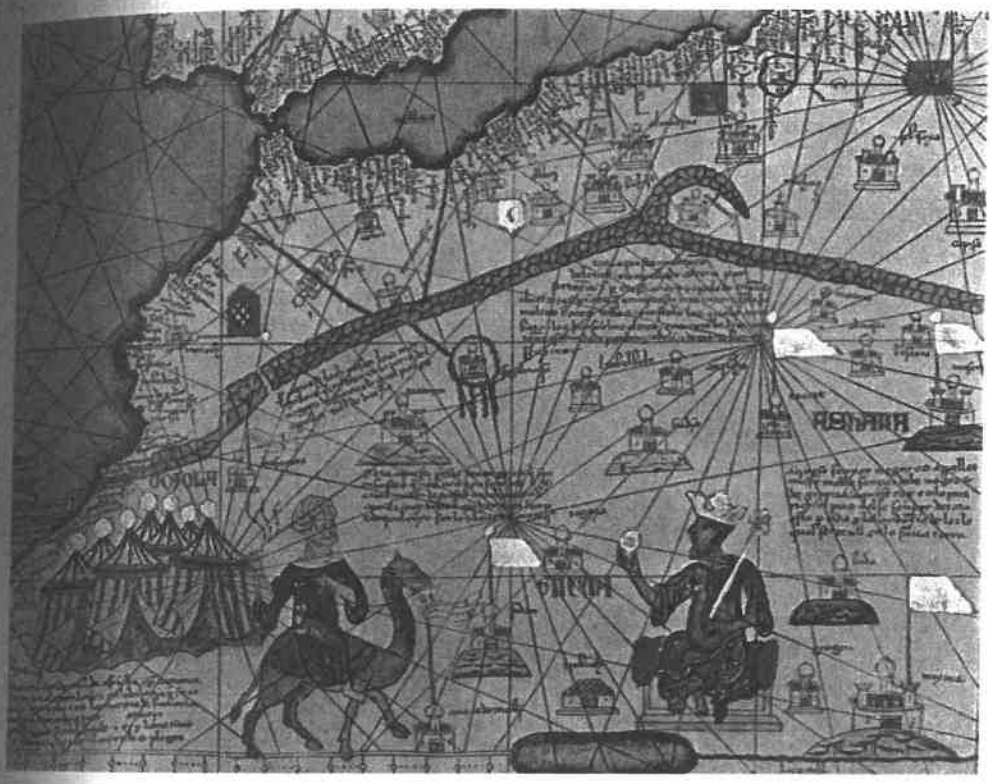

Figure 7.1

In 1324, Mansa Musa, King of Mali, made a pilgrimage to Mecca that brought the attention of the Muslim world to the wealth of his kingdom. A Jewish cartographer in Spain, Abraham Cresques, depicted the trip more than fifty years later in this map. Mansa Musa is depicted at the bottom right with a golden scepter and crown, symbolizing his royal power, and an enormous gold nugget, symbolizing his country's wealth.

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Contents and Learning Objectives

After reading each section, you should be able to answer these questions:

IN 1324, A GREAT CARAVAN OF more than a hundred camels, many slaves, and a multitude of retainers crossed the arid Sahara desert and wended its way into Cairo, on the banks of the Nile. Mansa Musa, lord of the African empire of Mali, was making the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, distributing gold with an open hand. The wealth and prodigality of the young king dazzled all who witnessed it, his polished manners and command of Arabic impressed those who met him, and his fame spread throughout the Islamic world and beyond. The chronicler al-Omari, who visited Cairo a dozen years later, reported that people still spoke of the entourage of the young king that had spent so much gold in the markets and had given so much as gifts and alms that the price of gold actually declined due to its ample supply. Other great caravans had made the trek from Mali across the desert before, and some came after, but none had been so magnificent. Mansa Musa's caravan symbolized the wealthy potential of Africa, but even by the time he made his trip, West African gold was already well known in the world economy, and Africa was already involved in contacts of various kinds with other areas of the world (Figure 7.1).

Mali, the kingdom of this great lord, fascinated the Muslim observers in Cairo, Damascus, and Fez. Like the earlier kingdom of Ghana, Mali was another state of the savanna country, between the desert and the forests of West Africa. Mali was formed by the Malinke peoples, and its access to gold and control of the caravan routes had promoted its rise, while its powerful army had created an empire that extended over much of the savanna from the Niger to the Senegal River. Its ruling families had converted to Islam, but the famous and cosmopolitan Moroccan traveler Abdallah Ibn Battuta, who visited Mali not long after Mansa Musa's pilgrimage, found the local customs and food less refined than those of the elegant courts to which he was accustomed, and he found some of the practices shocking. Yet much was recognizable to him as well. Mali was an African kingdom that had become an extension of the Islamic world, and its success was tied to the trade routes that linked it to the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

The history of Mali underlines the fact that Africa below the Sahara was never totally isolated from the centers of civilization in Egypt, West Asia, or the Mediterranean, but for long periods the contacts were difficult and intermittent. This chapter will examine the increasing impact of a growing international network on Africa roughly in the period between 1200 and 1600 C.E. The arrival of Islam, after 800 C.E., had transformed many aspects of life in some African societies and brought them into wider contacts through trade, politics, and cultural exchange. But we must also recognize that the African societies influenced by Islam often maintained their own traditions and that other African regions remained little touched by Islam and continued to develop along their own trajectories. It is also important to realize that interactions with North Africa and the Middle East did not extend to direct encounters with the great Mongol Empire during this crucial period.

African civilizations built somewhat less clearly on prior societies than did other civilizations around 1200. Some earlier themes, such as the Bantu migration and the formation of large states in the Western Sudan, noted in Chapter 2, persisted. Overall, sub-Saharan Africa remained a varied and distinctive setting; parts of it, like the port cities of the East African coast, were drawn into new contacts with the growing world network, but much of it retained a certain isolation or cultural autonomy. The spread of universal faiths like Islam and Christianity was an important aspect of African history in this period, but much of Central and Southern Africa was relatively unaffected by these outside influences.

7.1 African Societies: Diversity and Similarities

What were the main political and religious forms in sub-Saharan Africa, and what were some of the principal regional patterns?

As a continent—the world's second largest—Africa is so vast and its societies so diverse that it is almost impossible to generalize about them. Differences in geography, language, religion, politics, and other aspects of life contributed to Africa's lack of political unity over long periods of time. Unlike in many parts of Asia, Europe, and North Africa, neither universal states nor universal religions characterized the history of sub-Saharan Africa. Yet universal religions, first Christianity and later Islam, did find adherents in Africa and sometimes contributed to the formation of large states and empires.

African societies developed diverse forms, from stateless societies organized around kinship or age sets to large centralized states, and within this diversity were many shared aspects of language and beliefs. Universalistic faiths penetrated the continent and served as the basis for important cultural developments in Nubia and Ethiopia.

100 C.E.	600 C.E.	1000 C.E.	1200 C.E.	1400 C.E.
100–200 Camels introduced for trade in the Sahara	**600–700** Islam spreads across North Africa	**1000** Ghana at height of its power **1100** Almoravid movement in the Sahara	**1200** Rise of the empire of Mali **1260** Death of Sundiata; earliest stone buildings at Zimbabwe; Lalibela rules in Ethiopia; Yoruba culture flourishes at Ile-Ife **1300** Mali at its height; Kanem Empire is a rival **1324** Pilgrimage of Mansa Musa	**1400** Flourishing of cities of Timbuktu and Djenne; Ethiopian Christian kingdom; Swahili cities flourish on east African coast **1417, 1431** Last Chinese trade voyages to East Africa **1500** Songhay Empire flourishes; Benin at height of power **1400–c. 1550** Great Zimbabwe at height, gold and international trade

7.1.1 Societies with and without States

Some African societies had rulers who exercised control through a hierarchy of officials in what can be called states, but others were **politically decentralized societies** organized around kinship or other forms of obligation and lacking the concentration of political power and authority we normally associate with the state. Sometimes the decentralized societies were larger and more extensive than the neighboring states. Societies lacking state organization had forms of government, but the authority and power normally exercised by a ruler and his court in a kingdom could be held instead by a council of families or by the community, with no need to tax the population to support the ruler, the bureaucrats, the army, or the nobles, as was usually the case in state-building societies. Stateless societies had little concentration of authority, and it affected only a small part of the peoples' lives. In these societies, government was rarely a full-time occupation, and there was no political class. Such societies often were less hierarchical and more egalitarian.

politically decentralized societies
African societies organized around kinship or other forms of obligation and lacking the concentration of political power and authority associated with formal states.

Other alternatives to formal government were possible. Among peoples of the West African forest, secret societies of men and women controlled customs and beliefs and were able to limit the authority of rulers. Especially among peoples who had sharp rivalries between lineages or family groupings, secret societies developed that cut across the lineage divisions. Members' allegiance to these groups transcended their lineage ties. The secret societies settled village disputes. They acted to maintain stability within the community, and they served as an alternative to the authority of state institutions.

Throughout Africa many decentralized societies thrived, perhaps aided by the fact that internal social pressures or disputes often could be resolved by allowing dissidents to leave and establish a new village in the sparsely populated continent. Still, decentralized societies found it difficult to resist external pressures, mobilize for warfare, organize large building projects, or create stable conditions for continuous long-distance trade with other peoples. All these needs or goals contributed to the formation of states in sub-Saharan Africa.

State-building took place under a variety of conditions. For example, West Africa experienced both the cultural influence of Islam and its own internal developments. The formation of some powerful states, such as Mali and Songhay, depended more on military power and dynastic alliances than on ethnic or cultural unity. In this development and in the process of state formation itself, Africa paralleled the roughly contemporaneous developments of Western Europe. The growth of city-states with strong merchant communities in West Africa and on the Indian Ocean coast bore certain similarities to the urban developments of Italy and Germany in this period. However, disparities between the technologies and ideologies of Europeans and Africans also created differences in the ways these societies developed. That was made clear with the arrival of Europeans—the Portuguese—in the fifteenth century whose contact drew Africans increasingly into the world economy in ways that transformed African development in the following centuries.

7.1.2 Common Elements in African Societies

Even amid the diversity of African cultures, certain similarities in language, thought, and religion provided some underlying unities. The spread of the Bantu-speaking peoples provided a linguistic base across much of Africa, so that even though specific languages differed, structure and vocabulary allowed some mutual understanding between neighboring Bantu speakers.

The same might be said of the animistic religion that characterized much of Africa. From the continent's earliest beginnings people held a belief that a soul or spirit existed in every object, even if it was inanimate. In a future state this soul or spirit would exist as part of an immaterial soul. The spirit, therefore, was thought to be universal. Africans, like Europeans, believed that some evil, disasters, and illnesses were produced by witchcraft. Specialists were needed to combat the power of evil and eliminate the witches. This led in many societies to the existence of a class of diviners or priests who guided religious practice and helped protect the community. Above all, African religion provided a cosmology—a view of how the universe worked—and a guide to ethics and behavior.

Many African peoples shared an underlying belief in a creator deity whose power and action were expressed through spirits or lesser gods and through the founding ancestors of the group. The ancestors often were viewed as the first settlers and thus the "owners" of the land or the local resources. Through them, the fertility of the land, game, people, and herds could be ensured. Among some groups, working the land took on religious significance, so the land itself had a meaning beyond its economic usefulness.

Religion, economics, and history were thus closely intertwined. The family, lineage, or clan around which many African societies were organized also had an important role in dealing with the gods. Deceased ancestors often were a direct link between their living relatives and the spirit world. Veneration of the ancestors and gods was part of the same system of belief. Such a system was strongly linked to specific places and people. It showed remarkable resiliency even in the face of contact with monotheistic religions such as Islam and Christianity.

The economies of Africa are harder to describe in general terms than some basic aspects of politics and culture. North Africa, fully involved in the Mediterranean and Arab economic world, stands clearly apart. Sub-Saharan Africa varied greatly from one region to the next. In many areas, settled agriculture and skilled ironwork had been established

before or advanced rapidly during the postclassical period. Specialization encouraged active local and regional trade, the basis for many lively markets and the many large cities that grew in both the structured states and the decentralized areas. The bustle and gaiety of market life were important ingredients of African society, and women as well as men participated actively. Professional merchants, in many cases in hereditary kinship groupings, often controlled trade. Participation in international trade increased in many regions in this period, mainly with the Islamic world and often through Arab traders.

Finally, one of the least-known aspects of early African societies is the size and dynamics of their populations. This is true not only of Africa but of much of the world. Archaeological evidence, travelers' reports, and educated guesses are used to estimate the population of early African societies, but in truth, our knowledge of how Africa fits into the general trends of the world population is very slight. By 1500, Africa may have had 30 million to 60 million inhabitants.

7.1.3 The Arrival of Islam in North Africa

Africa north of the Sahara had long been part of the world of classical antiquity, with relations with both Greece and Rome. Toward the end of the Roman Empire, Christianity had taken a firm hold in Mediterranean Africa, and with the rise of Islam and its sweep across the **Maghrib** or Western North Africa, and into Spain, the ties to the Mediterranean world became even closer.

Maghrib
[MAH-gribb] The Arabic word for Western North Africa.

Islam offered many attractions within Africa. Its fundamental teaching that all Muslims are equal within the community of believers made the acceptance of conquerors and new rulers easier. The Islamic tradition of uniting the powers of the state and religion in the person of the ruler or caliph appealed to some African kings as a way of reinforcing their authority. The concept that all members of the umma, or community of believers, were equal put the newly converted Berbers and later Africans on an equal footing with the Arabs, at least in law. Despite these egalitarian and somewhat utopian ideas within Islam, practices differed considerably at local levels. Social stratification remained important in Islamicized societies, and ethnic distinctions also divided the believers. Despite certain teachings on the equality between men and women, the fine for killing a man was twice that for killing a woman. The disparity between law and practice—between equality before God and inequality within the world—sometimes led to utopian reform movements.

7.1.4 The Christian Kingdoms: Nubia and Ethiopia

Islam was not the first universalistic religion to take root in Africa, and the wave of Arab conquests across Northern Africa had left behind it islands of Christianity. Christian converts had been made in Egypt and Ethiopia even before the conversion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century C.E. In addition to the Christian kingdom of Axum, Christian communities thrived in Egypt and Nubia, farther up the Nile. The Christians of Egypt, the Copts, developed a rich tradition in contact with Byzantium, translating the gospels and other religious literature from Greek to Coptic, their own tongue, which was based on the language of ancient Egypt. On doctrinal and political issues, they eventually split from the Byzantine connection. When Egypt was conquered by Arab armies and then converted to Islam, the Copts were able to maintain their faith; Muslim rulers recognized them as followers of a revealed religion and thus entitled to a certain tolerance. The Coptic influence had already spread up the Nile into Nubia, the ancient land of Kush. Muslim attempts to penetrate Nubia were met with such stiff resistance in the ninth century that the Christian descendants of ancient Kush were left as independent Christian kingdoms until the thirteenth century.

The Ethiopian kingdom that grew from Axum was perhaps the most important African Christian outpost. Cut off from Christian Byzantium by the Muslim conquest of

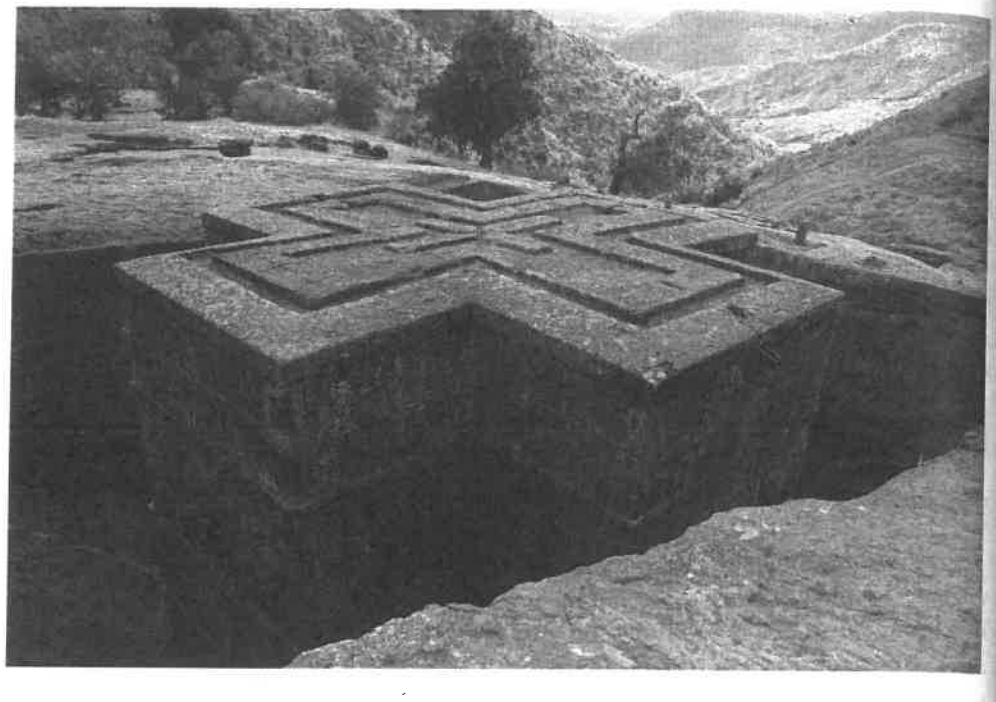


Figure 7.2

This extraordinary thirteenth-century church, *Bet Giorgis*, represents the power of early Christianity in Ethiopia. It was one of a great complex of 11 churches that King Lalibela believed God had commanded him to build. Dedicated to St. George, the patron saint of Ethiopia, it was cut out of the bedrock of the earth. Its roof, in the shape of an enormous cross, lies at ground level. Although it is surrounded by impassable walls and can be reached only by way of an underground tunnel carved in stone, it is still used for worship today.

Gilad Flesch/PhotoStock-Israel/Alamy Stock Photo

Egypt and the Red Sea coast, surrounded by pagan neighbors, and probably influenced by pagan and Jewish immigrants from Yemen, the Christian kingdom turned inward. Its people occupied the Ethiopian highlands, living in fortified towns and supporting themselves with agriculture on terraced hillsides. Eventually, through a process of warfare, conversion, and compromise with non-Christian neighbors, a new dynasty emerged, which under King Lalibela (d. 1221) sponsored a remarkable building project in which 11 great churches were sculpted from the rock in the town that bore his name (Figure 7.2).

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, an Ethiopian Christian state emerged under a dynasty that traced its origins back to the biblical marriage of Solomon and Sheba. Using the Ge'ez language of Axum as a religious language and Amharic as the common speech, this state maintained its brand of Christianity in isolation while facing constant pressure from its increasingly Muslim neighbors.

The struggle between the Christian state in the Ethiopian highlands and the Muslim peoples in Somalia and on the Red Sea coast shaped much of the history of the region and continues to do so today. When one of these Muslim states, with help from the Ottoman Turks, threatened the Ethiopian kingdom, a Portuguese expedition arrived in 1542 at Massawa on the Red Sea and turned the tide in favor of its Christian allies. Portuguese attempts thereafter to bring Ethiopian Christianity into the Roman Catholic Church failed, and Ethiopia remained isolated, Christian, and fiercely independent.

7.2 Kingdoms of the Grasslands

How did the Sudanic kingdoms develop in the Sahel, and what advantages did they have?

Sahel

The northern grassland region of sub-Saharan Africa, stretching south of the desert.

In the **Sahel** grasslands, several powerful states emerged that combined Islamic religion and culture with local practices. The kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay and the Hausa states were African adaptations of Islam and its fusion with African traditions.

On the edge of the desert, where several resource zones came together, African states such as Ghana had already formed by the eighth century by exchanging gold from the forests of West Africa for salt or dates from the Sahara or for goods from

Mediterranean North Africa.Camels, which had been introduced from Asia to the Sahara between the first and fifth centuries C.E., had greatly improved the possibilities of trade, but these animals, which thrived in arid and semiarid environments, could not live in the humid forest zones because of disease. Thus, the Sahel, the extensive grassland belt at the southern edge of the Sahara, became a point of exchange between the forests to the south and North Africa—an active border area where ideas, trade, and people from the Sahara and beyond arrived in increasing numbers. Along the Sahel, several African states developed between the trading cities, taking advantage of their position as intermediaries in the trade. But their location on the open plains of the dry Sahel also meant that these states were subject to attack and periodic droughts.

7.2.1 Sudanic States

The **Sudanic** states that formed in the grasslands often had a patriarch or council of elders of a particular family or group of lineages as leaders. Usually these states had a territorial core area in which the people were of the same linguistic or ethnic background, but their power extended over subordinate communities. These were conquest states, which drew on the taxes, tribute, and military support of the subordinate areas, lineages, and villages. The effective control of subordinate societies and the legal or informal control of their sovereignty are the usual definition of empires. The Sudanic states of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay fit that definition (Map 7.1).

The rulers of these states were considered sacred and were surrounded by rituals that separated them from their subjects. Islam was used to reinforce indigenous ideas of kingship, so that Islam became something of a royal cult. Much of the population never converted, and the Islamicized ruling families also drew on their traditional powers to fortify their rule.

Several savanna states rose among the various peoples in the Sudan. We can trace the development and culture of two of the most important, Mali and Songhay, as examples of the fusion of Islamic and indigenous African cultures within the context of trade and military expansion.

Sudanic
A term describing the major African languages spoken from Ethiopia to Senegal.

juula
[JOO-luh] Malinke merchants; formed small partnerships to carry out trade throughout Mali Empire; eventually spread throughout much of West Africa.

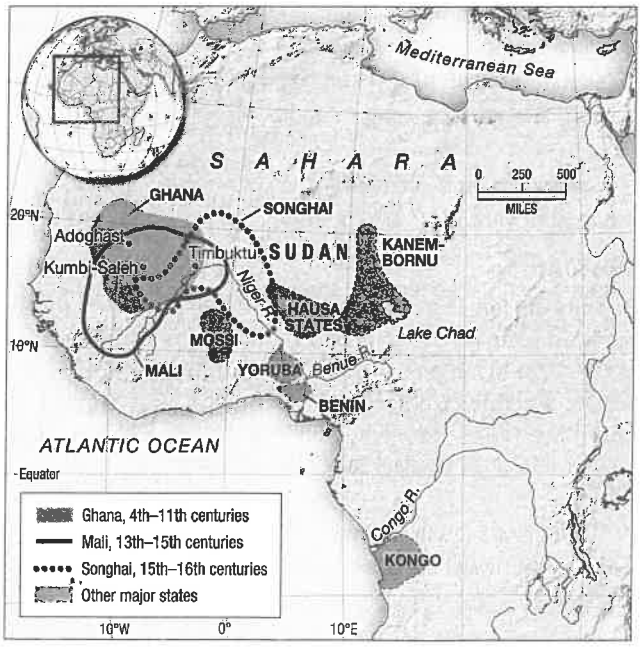
Sundiata
The "Lion Prince"; a member of the Keita clan; created a unified state that became the Mali Empire; died about 1260.

7.2.2 The Empire of Mali and Sundiata, the "Lion Prince"

The empire of Mali, centered between the Senegal and Niger rivers, was the creation of the Malinke peoples, who in the thirteenth century broke away from the control of Ghana, which was by then in decline. In Mali the old forms of kingship were reinforced by Islam. As in many of the Sudanic states, the rulers supported Islam by building mosques, attending public prayers, and supporting preachers. In return, sermons to the faithful emphasized obedience and support of the king. Mali became a model of these Islamicized Sudanic kingdoms. The economic basis of society in the Mali Empire was agriculture. This was combined with an active tradition of trade in many products, although like Ghana, Mali also depended on its access to gold-producing areas to the south. Malinke merchants, or **juula**, formed small partnerships and groups to carry out trade throughout the area. They spread beyond the borders of the empire and throughout much of West Africa.

The beginning of Malinke (also called Mande, or Mandinka or Mandingo) expansion is attributed to **Sundiata** (sometimes written Sunjata), a brilliant leader whose exploits

Map 7.1 EMPIRES OF THE WESTERN SUDAN



were celebrated in a great oral tradition. The **griots**, professional oral historians who also served as keepers of traditions and advisors to kings, began their epic histories of Mali with Sundiata, whom they called the "Lion Prince," or "the father of the Bright Country," and "the master of a hundred kings."

griots
[grEE O, grEE ot] Professional oral historians who served as keepers of traditions and advisors to kings within the Mali Empire.

After a difficult childhood, Sundiata emerged from a period of interfamily and regional fighting to create a unified state. Oral histories ascribed to him the creation of the basic rules and relationships of Malinke society and the outline of the government of the empire of Mali. He became the mansa, or emperor. It was said that Sundiata "divided up the world," which meant that he was considered the originator of social arrangements. Sixteen clans of free people were entitled to bear arms and carry the bow and quiver of arrows as the symbol of their status, five clans were devoted to religious duties, and four clans were specialists such as blacksmiths and griots. Such clan arrangements were traditional among the peoples of the savanna and had existed in ancient Ghana, but now Sundiata was credited with their origins. Although he created the political institutions of rule that allowed for great regional and ethnic differences in the federated provinces, he also stationed garrisons to maintain loyalty and security. Travel was secure, and crime was severely punished, as Ibn Battuta (1304–1368 C.E.), the Arab traveler, reported: "Of all peoples," he said, "the Blacks are those who most hate injustice, and their emperor pardons none who is guilty of it." The security of travelers and their goods was an essential element in a state where commerce played so important a role.

Sundiata died about 1260, but his successors expanded the borders of Mali until it controlled most of the Niger valley almost to the Atlantic coast. A sumptuous court was established and hosted a large number of traders. Mali grew wealthy from the trade. Perhaps the most famous of Sundiata's successors was Mansa Kankan Musa (c. 1312–1337), whose pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 brought the attention of the Muslim world to Mali, as was described in the beginning of this chapter. Mansa Musa's trip had other consequences as well. From Mecca he brought back poet and architect Ishak al-Sahili, who came from Muslim Spain. The architect directed the building of several important mosques, and eventually a distinctive form of Sudanic architecture developed that made use of beaten clay. This can still be seen in the great mosque of Djenne.

7.2.3 City Dwellers and Villagers

The cities of the Western Sudan began to resemble those of North Africa, but with a distinctive local architectural style. The towns were commercial and often included craft specialists and a resident foreign merchant community. The military expansion of states such as Ghana, Mali, and later Songhay contributed to their commercial success because the power of the state protected traders. A cosmopolitan court life developed as merchants and scholars were attracted by the power and protection of Mali. Malinke traders ranged across the Sudan and exploited their position as intermediaries. Cities of commercial exchange flourished, such as Djenne and **Timbuktu**, which lay just off the flood plain on the great bend in the Niger River. Timbuktu was reported to have a population of 50,000, and by the fourteenth century, its great Sankore mosque contained a library and an associated university where scholars, jurists, and Muslim theologians studied. The book was the symbol of civilization in the Islamic world, and it was said that the book trade in Timbuktu was the most lucrative business.

Timbuktu
Port city of Mali; located just off the flood plain on the great bend in the Niger River; population of 50,000; contained a library and university.

For most people in the empire of Mali and the other Sudanic states, life was not centered on the royal court, the great mosque, or long-distance trade but rather on the agricultural cycle and the village. Making a living from the land was the preoccupation of most people, and about 80 percent of the villagers lived by farming. This was a difficult life. The soils of the savanna were sandy and shallow. Plows were rarely used. The villagers were people of the hoe who looked to the skies in the spring for the first rains

to start their planting. Rice in the river valleys, millet, sorghums, some wheat, fruits, and vegetables provided the basis of daily life in the village and supplied the caravan trade. Even large farms rarely exceeded 10 acres, and most were much smaller. Clearing land often was done communally, accompanied by feasts and competitions, but the farms belonged to families and were worked by them. A man with two wives and several unmarried sons could work more land than a man with one wife and a smaller family. Polygamy, the practice of having multiple wives, was common in the region, and it remains so today.

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The Great Oral Tradition and the Epic of Sundiata

Oral traditions take various forms. Some are simply the shared stories of a family or people, but in many west African societies, the mastery of oral traditions is a skill practiced by *griots*. Although today's griots are professional musicians and bards, historically they held important places at the courts of west African kingdoms. The epic of Sundiata or Sunjata as he is called in some versions, the great ruler of Mali, has been passed down orally for centuries. There are many versions. In the following excerpts from a version collected in 1994 among the Mande people of Guinea by David Conrad with the assistance the African scholars Djobba Kamara and Lansana Magassouba, the complex mix tradition, fable, history, and divination is apparent. [David C. Conrad, ed. and trans. *Sunjata. A New Prose Version* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), pp. 118-121.] In the preservation of these epics the role of the *griots*, the professional bards who are the depositors of the past play an essential role to preserve the memory of great kings and great events, because as they believed, knowing the past would help to understand the future. Their aim is to instruct and entertain. The *griots* do not believe that written history is better than the narrative that they express with the depth and feeling of the human voice. As some of them argue, great prophets did not write their message, but their words were no less true.

The following excerpt describes a major battle fought by Sundiata, the founder of the Mali empire against the forces of Sumaworo, king of the Sosos, who had taken control of Mali while Sundiata was in exile, and who was often called an evil sorcerer in versions of these epics. Sundiata was accompanied by a major ally named Fakoli, the king of a neighboring kingdom, himself a powerful sorcerer, and the founder of many blacksmith lineages and thus associated with the importance of iron weapons and tools. Note here the interweaving of family rivalry and politics, competitive claims of family association with the kingdom, and with origins in Arabia and thus by implication with Islam, the celebration of Sundiata's prowess, and the high value placed on horses and thus cavalry, the key to military power in the savanna.

The two rivals meet. Sumaworo, who is older, challenges Sunjata's claims to rule and denigrates him as an upstart youngster.

...the Mande people seem to think you are their *mansa* [king], and it is true that you would not be here if you did not have some power, but that power will do no good against me. I told you before. . . that if the Mande people sent you to fight against me, you should refuse. As you now know I have become like hot ashes surrounding Manden and Soso; any toddler who tries to cross me will be burned up to his thighs. And yet you are here.

[Sunjata responded] Ah, father Sumaworo, as I told you, this is my father's home, not yours. You are not from here. Your father came from Folonegbe; your father was a latecomer to Manden. You are only the second generation of your people in Manden, but we [the Keita clan] have been here for eight generations: our ancestor Mamadi Kani first came here from Hejaji [Hejaz]

The battle then began:

The two armies were waiting. Soso on one side, Manden on the other. Everybody was watching the commanders on the battlefield. Fakoli stood off one side of Sunjata; Turama'an [another general] on the other. Sumaworo was also flanked by his men.

Sunjata, Sumaworo, and their men dashed across the field and up the hill. Near the top of the hill, they faded from sight; even as the dust disappeared. Soon they reached the edge of a very deep ravine. Gathering all her strength, Sunjata's [magical] mare jumped the ravine and landed on the other side. When Sumaworo's horse tried to jump the ravine, it tumbled to the bottom. Fakoli and Turama'an—whose horses safely jumped the ravine—turned and, with Sunjata, went to look down at Sumaworo who was trapped at the bottom of the ravine.

Sunjata called down, "Sumaworo, what is the matter?"

"...Kill me here; do not carry me to the town. Do not bring such shame on me. God controls all time. Please do not take me back."

Sunjata said, "I am not going to finish you off. No one can climb out of that ravine; you're stuck. . . Turning to his companions he said, "Come, let's go home."

They had gone some distance when Fakoli made a decision, turned and went back to the ravine... . Taking his axe from his shoulder, Fakoli struck Sumaworo on the head, *poh!*

He said, "This will be mentioned in Ma'an Sunjata's praise song." [And he was right] Though we sing, "Head-breaking Mari Jata [an honorary title for Sundiata] it was really Fakoli who broke Sumaworo's head. . .

According to the Griot, Fakoli returned three times to strike Sumaworo, each blow adding to the praise song of Sunjata and of his victory. Sunjata and his men returned home and as the epic celebrates "laughter returned to manden and eventually Soso joined in" as Sunjata began to organize and reform the new unified Mali empire.

Review Questions:

1. Can oral traditions be used like other sources?
2. Even if they are not entirely true, do they have historical value?
3. Judging from this epic, how did people of the Sudan define the qualities of a king?
4. What aspects of the epic reveal contacts between this part of Africa and the wider world?

Given the difficulties of the soil, the periodic droughts, insect pests, storage problems, and the limitations of technology, the farmers of the Sudanic states—by the methods of careful cultivation, crop rotation, and, in places such as Timbuktu, the use of irrigation—were able to provide for their people the basic foods that supported them and the imperial states on which they were based. The hoe and the bow became symbols of the common people of the savanna states.

7.2.4 The Songhay Kingdom

Songhay
[sohng-HEYE] Successor state to Mali; dominated middle reaches of Niger valley; formed as independent kingdom under a Berber dynasty; capital at Gao; reached imperial status under Sunni Ali (r. 1464–1492).

As the power of Mali began to wane, a successor state from within the old empire was already beginning to emerge. The people of **Songhay** dominated the middle areas of the Niger valley. Traditionally, the society of Songhay was made up of "masters of the soil," that is, farmers and herders; and "masters of the waters," or fishers. Songhay had begun to form in the seventh century as an independent kingdom, perhaps under a Berber dynasty. By 1010, a capital was established at Gao on the Niger River, and the rulers had become Muslims, although the majority of the population remained pagan. Dominated by Mali for a while, by the 1370s Songhay had established its independence again and began to thrive as new sources of gold from the West African forests began to pass through its territory. Gao became a large city with a resident foreign merchant community and several mosques. Under a dynamic leader, Sunni Ali (r. 1464–1492), the empire of Songhay was forged.

Muhammad the Great
Islamic ruler of the mid-sixteenth century; extended the boundaries of the Songhay Empire.

Sunni Ali was a great tactical commander and a ruthless leader. His cavalry expanded the borders and seized the traditional trading cities of Timbuktu and Djenne. The middle Niger valley fell under his control, and he developed a system of provincial administration to mobilize recruits for the army and rule the far-flung conquests. Although apparently a Muslim, he met any challenge to his authority, even when it came from the Muslim scholars of Timbuktu, whom he persecuted. A line of Muslim rulers who took the military title *askia* succeeded him. These rulers, especially **Muhammad the Great**, extended the boundaries of the empire so that by the mid-sixteenth century Songhay dominated the central Sudan.

Life in the Songhay Empire followed many of the patterns established in the previous savanna states. The fusion of Islamic and pagan populations and traditions continued. Muslim clerics and jurists sometimes were upset by the pagan beliefs and practices that continued among the population, and even more by the local interpretation of Islamic law. They wanted to impose a strict interpretation of the law of Islam and were shocked that men and women mixed freely in the markets and streets, and that women went unveiled.

Songhay remained the dominant power in the region until the end of the sixteenth century. In 1591, a Muslim army from Morocco, equipped with muskets, crossed the Sahara and defeated the vastly larger forces of Songhay. This sign of weakness stimulated internal revolts against the ruling family, and eventually the parts of the old empire broke away.

The demise of the Songhay imperial structure did not mean the end of the political and cultural tradition of the Western Sudan. Other states that combined Muslim and pagan traditions rose among the **Hausa** peoples of Northern Nigeria, based on cities such as Kano and Katsina. The earliest Muslim ruler of Kano took control in the late fourteenth century and turned the city into a center of Muslim learning. In Kano and other Hausa cities of the region, an urbanized royal court in a fortified capital ruled over the animistic villages, where the majority of the population lived. With powerful cavalry forces these states extended their rule and protected their active trade in salt, grains, and cloth. Although these later Islamicized African states tended to be small, and their goals were local, they reproduced many of the social, political, and religious forms of the great empires of the grasslands.

Hausa
Peoples of present-day Northern Nigeria; formed states following the demise of Songhay Empire that combined Muslim and pagan traditions.

Beyond the Sudan, Muslim penetration came in various forms. Merchants became established in most of the major trading cities, and religious communities developed in each of these, often associated with particular families. Networks of trade and contact were established widely over the region as merchants and groups of pastoralists established their outposts in the area of Guinea. Muslim traders, herders, warriors, and religious leaders became important minorities in these segmented African societies, composed of elite families, occupational groups, free people, and slaves. Intermarriage often took place, but Muslim influence varied widely from region to region. Nevertheless, families of traders and lineages that became known as specialists in Muslim law spread widely through the region, so that by the eighteenth century Muslim minorities were scattered widely throughout West Africa, even in areas where no Islamicized state had emerged.

7.2.5 Political and Social Life in the Sudanic States

We can generalize from these brief descriptions of Mali and Songhay about the nature of the Sudanic states. The village communities, clans, and various ethnic groups continued to organize many aspects of life in the savanna. The development of unified states provided an overarching structure that allowed the various groups and communities to coexist. The large states usually represented the political aims and power of a particular group and often of a dominant family. Many states pointed to the immigrant origins of the ruling families, and in reality the movement and fusion of populations were constant features in the Sudan. Islam provided a universalistic faith that served the interests of many groups. Common religion and law provided solidarity and trust to the merchants who lived in the cities and whose caravans brought goods to and from the savanna. The ruling families used Islamic titles, such as *emir* or *caliph*, to reinforce their authority, and they surrounded themselves with literate Muslim advisors and scribes, who aided in government administration. The Muslim concept of a ruler who united civil and religious authority reinforced traditional ideas of kingship. It is also important to note that in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, the formation of states heightened social differences and made these societies more hierarchical.

In all the Sudanic states, Islam was fused with the existing traditions and beliefs. Rulership and authority were still based on the ability to intercede with local spirits, and although Sundiata and Sunni Ali were nominally Muslim, they did not ignore the traditional basis of their rule. For this reason, Islam in these early stages in the Sudan tended to accommodate pagan practice and belief. Large proportions of the populations of Mali and Songhay never converted to Islam, and those who did convert often maintained many of the old beliefs as well.

Sharia
[shä rEE ä] Islamic law; defined, among other things, the patrilineal nature of Islamic inheritance.

We can see this fusion of traditions clearly in the position of women. Several Sudanic societies were matrilineal, and some recognized the role of women within the lines of kinship, contrary to the normal patrilineal customs inscribed in the **Sharia**, or Islamic law. As in the case of Songhay, North African visitors to the Sudan were shocked by the easy familiarity between men and women and the freedom enjoyed by women.

Finally, slavery and the slave trade between Black Africa and the rest of the Islamic world had a major impact on women and children in these societies. Various forms of slavery and dependent labor had existed in Africa before Islam was introduced. Although we know little about slavery in Central Africa in this period, slavery had been a marginal aspect of the Sudanic states. Africans had been enslaved by others before, and Nubian (African) slaves had been known in the classical world, but with the Muslim conquests of North Africa and commercial penetration to the south, slavery became a more widely diffused phenomenon, and a slave trade in Africans developed on a new scale.

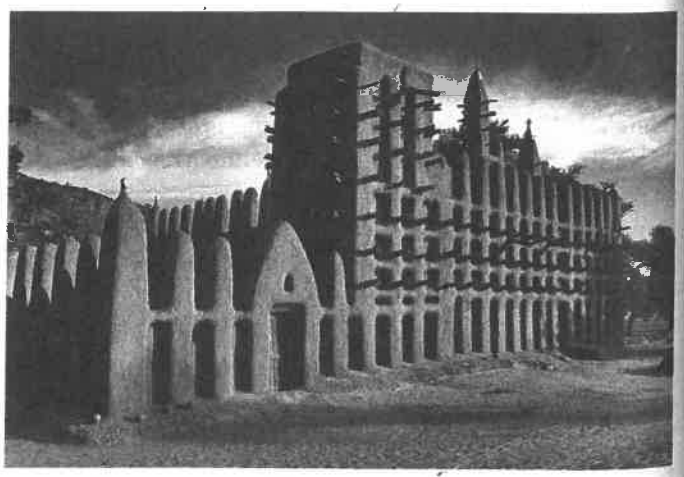
In theory, Muslims viewed slavery as a stage in the process of conversion—a way of preparing pagans to become Muslims—but in reality, conversion did not guarantee freedom. Slaves in the Islamic world were used in a variety of occupations, as domestic servants and laborers, but they were also used as soldiers and administrators who, having no local ties and affiliations, were considered to be dependent on and thus trustworthy by their masters. Slaves were also used as eunuchs and concubines, hence the emphasis on enslaving women and children. The trade caravans from the Sahel across the Sahara often transported slaves as well as gold, and as we shall see, other slave trade routes developed from the African interior to the East African coast.

Frequently the children of slave mothers were freed and integrated into Muslim society. Although this custom was positive in one sense, it also meant a constant demand for more slaves to replace those who had been freed. Estimates of the volume of the trans-Saharan slave trade vary widely. One scholar places the total at 4.8 million, with another 2.4 million sent to the Muslim ports on the Indian Ocean coast. Actual figures may have been considerably lower, but the trade extended over 700 years and affected a large area. It was one more way in which Islamic civilization changed sub-Saharan Africa.

Visualizing the Past

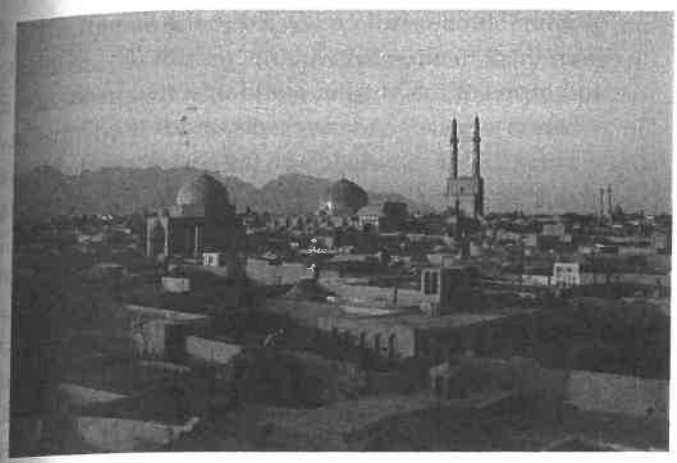
The Architecture of Faith

The spread of Islam eventually created spiritual, commercial, and cultural bonds between West Africa and the Middle East and especially between North Africa and Spain. The process of Islam's expansion and its local adaptation is apparent in the distinctive architectural style of West African mosques. Built usually of clay, incorporating wood beams for support and decoration, with a *mirab* tower and an open courtyard, these places of worship created spaces of simple elegance with local materials that reflect ethnic and regional differences. West African mosques vary considerably from the traditional patterns of the Middle East and South Asia. Mosques, like the simple buildings among the Dogon people or the elaborate Sankoré mosque at Timbuktu begun in 1324 by Mansa Musa and later the center of a university, reflect the integration of Islam into African life.



Dogon village mosque in Kani-Kombole, Mali, West Africa.

Bombaert Patrick/Alamy Stock Photo



Domed Middle Eastern mosques shown in the skyline of Yazd, Iran.

Igor Alyukov/Shutterstock

Review Questions:

1. The architectural styles of West African mosques differ from the classic models of the Middle East. In what way does that suggest that Islam's entry to the region was gradual and transmitted by merchants and traders?
2. In what ways do the mosques of West Africa reflect local conditions and practices?
3. What functions beside prayer did mosques play, and how did their construction tie West Africa to the wider world?

7.3 The Swahili Coast of East Africa

How integrated into international commerce were the cities of East Africa, and why?

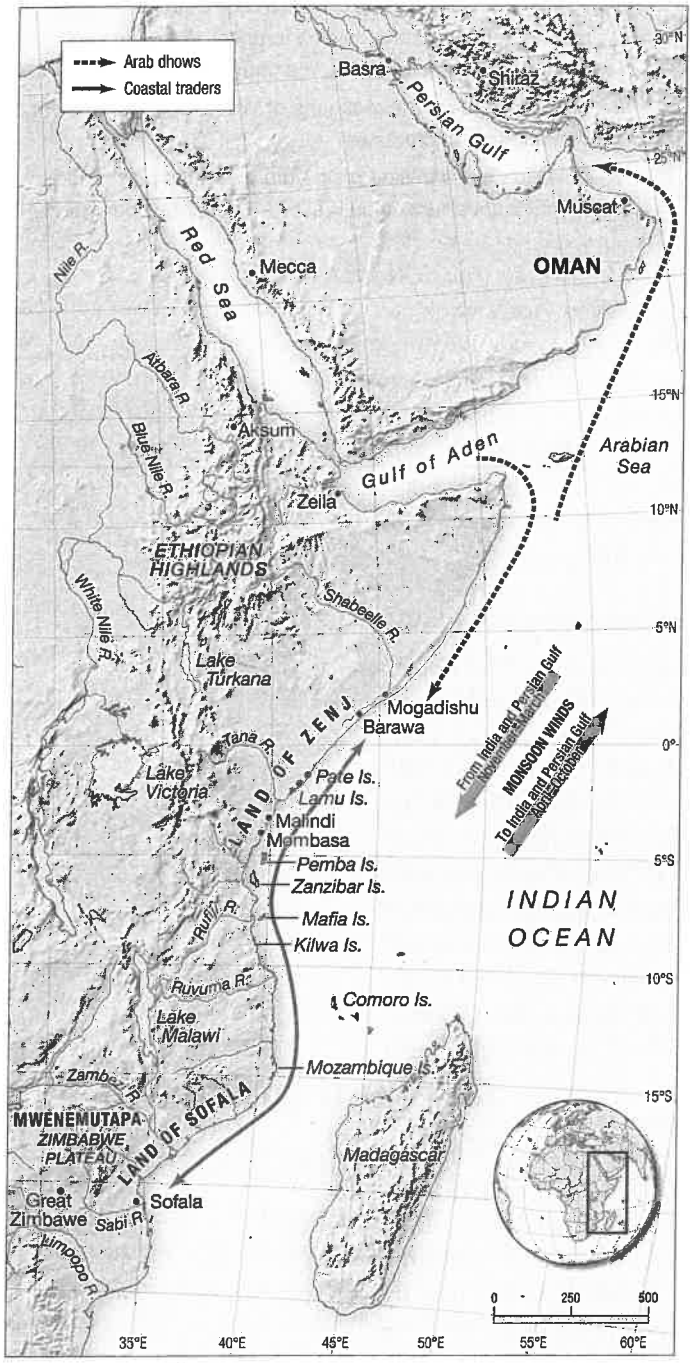
By the thirteenth century, a string of urbanized East African trading ports had developed along the coast. These towns shared the common Bantu-based and Arabic-influenced Swahili (which means "coastal") language and other cultural traits, although they were governed by separate Muslim ruling families. Towns such as Mogadishu, Mombasa, Malindi, Kilwa, Pate, and Zanzibar eventually contained mosques, tombs, and palaces of cut stone and coral. Ivory, gold, iron, slaves, and exotic animals were exported from these ports in exchange for silks from Persia and porcelain from China for the ruling Muslim families. The Arab traveler Ibn Battuta was impressed with the beauty and refinement of these towns. He described Kilwa as "one of the most beautiful and well constructed towns in the world" and was also impressed by the pomp and luxury of its ruler. Kilwa's advantage was its access to the gold coming from the interior and the fact that it was the furthest point south from which the ships sailing from India could hope to return in a single monsoon season.

From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, Kilwa flourished in the context of international trade, but it was not alone; about 30 of these port towns eventually dotted the coast (Map 7.2). They were tied to each other by an active coastal commerce and, in a few places, to the interior by a caravan trade, although it was usually Africans who brought the goods to the coast. Some Chinese ports sent goods directly to Africa in the thirteenth century, and as late as 1417 and 1431, large state-sponsored expeditions sailing directly from China stopped at the East African coast to load ivory, gold, and rare woods. The Chinese discontinued such contact after 1431, and goods from China came to the coast thereafter in the ships of Arab or Indian traders.

7.3.1 The Mixture of Cultures on the Swahili Coast

The Islamic influence in these towns promoted long-distance commerce. The thirteenth century was a period of great Islamic expansion, and as that faith spread eastward to India and Indonesia, it provided a religious bond of trust and law that facilitated trade throughout ports of the Indian Ocean. The ruling families in the East African trading ports built mosques and palaces; the mosque at Mogadishu was begun in 1231. Many of these ruling families claimed to be descendants of immigrants from Shiraz in Persia—a claim intended to legitimize their position and orthodoxy. In fact, some evidence indicates that the original

Map 7.2 THE SWAHILI COAST; AFRICAN MONSOON ROUTES AND MAJOR TRADE ROUTES



Muslim families had emigrated to the Somali coast and from there to other towns farther south. The institutions and forms of the Muslim world operated in these cities. Whereas the rulers and merchants tended to be Muslim, the majority of the population on the East African coast, and perhaps even in the towns themselves, retained their previous beliefs and culture.

African culture remained strong throughout the area. Swahili was essentially a Bantu language containing a large number of Arabic words, although many of these words were not incorporated until the sixteenth century. The language was written in an Arabic script some time before the thirteenth century; the ruling families could also converse in Arabic. Islam itself penetrated very little into the interior among the hunters, pastoralists, and farmers. Even the areas of the coast near the trading towns remained largely unaffected. In the towns, the mud and thatch houses of the non-Muslim common peoples surrounded the stone and coral buildings of the Muslim elite. Islamization was to some extent class-based. Still, a culture developed that fused Islamic and traditional elements. For example, family lineage was traced both through the maternal line, which controlled property (the traditional African practice), and through the paternal line, as was the Muslim custom. Swahili culture was a dynamic hybrid, and the Swahili people spread their language and culture along the coast of East Africa.

By the time the Portuguese arrived on this coast around 1500, the Swahili culture was widely diffused. Kilwa was no longer the predominant city, and the focus of trade had shifted to Malindi and Mombasa on the Kenya coast, but the commerce across the Indian Ocean continued. Eventually, the Portuguese raided Kilwa and Mombasa in an attempt to take control of trade. Their outpost on Mozambique and their control of Sofala put much of the gold trade in their hands. Although the Portuguese built a major outpost at Fort Jesus in Mombasa in 1592, they were never able to control the trade on the Northern Swahili coast. The East African patterns, as established by 1500, persisted even more than those of the Sudanic kingdoms. In some areas like the Swahili coast and the West African savanna, Islam became a dominant cultural force. In other areas such as the forest region of West Africa, Muslims remained a minority, and in other areas like the Central African forests, Islam hardly penetrated at all.

7.4 Peoples of the Forest and Plains

What kinds of political organization developed in Central and Southern Africa?

As important as the Islamic impact was on the societies of the savanna and the East African coast, other African peoples in the continent's interior and in the forests of West Africa were following their own trajectories of development. We must emphasize that African societies were diverse. By 1000 C.E., most of these societies were based on

a varied agriculture, sometimes combined with herding, and most societies used iron tools and weapons. Many were still organized in small village communities. In various places, however, states had formed. Some of them began to resolve the problems of integrating large territories under a single government and ruling subject peoples. Whereas Egypt, Kush, and Ethiopia had developed writing, and other areas borrowed the Arabic script, many sub-Saharan African societies were preliterate and transmitted their knowledge, skills, and traditions by oral methods and direct instruction. The presence or absence of writing has often been used as a measure of civilization by Western observers, but as in pre-Columbian Peru, various African societies made great strides in the arts, building, and statecraft, sometimes in the context of highly urbanized settings, without a system of writing.

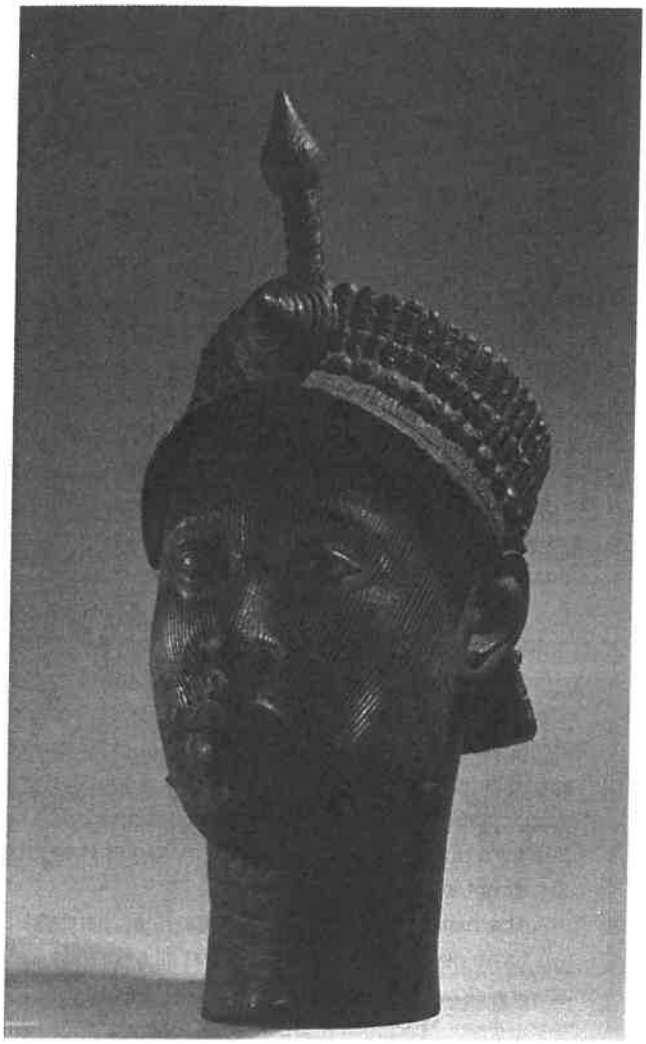
Across Central Africa, kingdoms developed that were supported by complex agrarian societies capable of great artistic achievements. At Benin, in the Kongo, in the Yoruba city-states, and at Great Zimbabwe, royal authority—often considered divinely inspired—led to the creation of powerful states (Figure 7.3).

7.4.1 Artists and Kings: Yoruba and Benin

The Yoruba peoples, who spoke a non-Bantu language, were organized in small city-states, each controlling a radius of perhaps 50 miles. The Yoruba were highly urbanized, although many of the town inhabitants farmed in the surrounding countryside. These city-states developed under the strong authority of regional kings, who were considered divine. A vast royal court that included secondary wives, musicians, magicians, and bodyguards of soldier-slaves surrounded the king. His rule was not absolute, however. We can use the example of the Yoruba state of Oyo, which had emerged by the fourteenth century. Its king, the alafin, controlled subject peoples through "princes" in the provinces, drawn from local lineages, who were allowed to exercise traditional rule as long as they continued to pay tribute to Oyo. In the capital, a council of state, made up of nobles from the seven city districts, advised the ruler and limited his power, and the Ogboni, or secret society of religious and political leaders, reviewed decisions of the king and the council. The union of civil and supernatural powers in the person of the ruler was the basis of power. The highly urbanized nature of Yoruba society and the flourishing of artisan traditions within these towns bear some similarity to those of the city-states of medieval Italy or Germany. The remarkable terra-cotta and bronze portrait heads of past rulers were produced in the period after 1200 C.E. by Yoruba artists; their lifelike quality and the skill of their execution are among the greatest achievements of African art.

Patterns similar to those in the Yoruba city-states could be found among Edo peoples to the east of Yoruba. A large city-state called **Benin** was formed sometime in the fourteenth century. Under Ewuare the Great (r. 1440–1473), Benin's control extended from the Niger River to the coast near modern Lagos. Benin City was described by early European visitors in the sixteenth century as a city of great population and broad avenues. The oba, or ruler, lived in a large royal compound surrounded by a great entourage, and his authority was buttressed by ritual and ceremony.

Figure 7.3



Crowned head of a member of a ruling family of Ife, in present-day Nigeria, sculpted of metal in the fourteenth or early fifteenth century. Ife was a city-state formed by the Yoruba people.

Werner Forman Archive/British Museum, London/Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

Benin
Powerful city-state (in present-day Nigeria) that came into contact with the Portuguese in 1485 but remained relatively free of European influence; important commercial and political entity until the nineteenth century.

Thinking Historically

Two Transitions in the History of World Population

Africa and the ancient Americas are two regions that make clear the difficulty of establishing the past size and structure of populations. Estimates based on fragmentary sources, the amount of available resources, and analysis of agricultural or hunting techniques have been used as rough guesses about population size. The results often are inadequate or controversial, but historians believe that the question is important. **Demography**, the study of population, has increasingly become a valued tool of historical inquiry. Clearly, unless we know the size, density, age structure, health, and reproductive capacity of a population, it is difficult to understand many aspects of its society, politics, and economy. In the contemporary world, most nations conduct periodic censuses to assess the present situation of their populations and to plan for the future. Before the mid-eighteenth century, when census-taking became a regular procedure, population estimates and counts were sporadic and usually inaccurate. Estimating populations in the past, especially in nonliterate societies, is a highly speculative exercise in which archeological evidence and estimates of productive capacity of agricultural practices and technology are used. The earliest date for a population estimate with a margin of error less than 20 percent is probably 1750.

The history of human demography can be divided into two basic periods: a long era—almost all of human history—of very slow growth and a very short period—about 275 years, from 1750 to the present—of very rapid growth. For most of this history, the human population was very small and grew very slowly. Before agriculture was developed, the hunting-and-gathering economies of the world's populations supported 5 million to 10 million people, if modern studies of such populations can be used as a guide. After about 8000 B.C.E., when plants and animals were domesticated, there was a first demographic transition as population began to increase more rapidly but still at a modest level. Agriculture provided a more secure and larger food supply, but population concentration in villages and towns may have made people more susceptible to disease and thus reduced their numbers. Other historians believe that the settled agricultural life also led to intensified warfare (because of the struggle for land and water) and increasing social stratification within societies.

Still, the Neolithic Revolution and the development of agriculture stimulated population growth. It was the first major transition in the history of world population. One estimate, based on Roman and Chinese population counts and some informed guesses about the rest of the world, is an annual growth rate of about 0.36 per million. By 1 C.E., the world population may have been about 300 million people. It increased between 1 C.E. and 1750 C.E. to about 500 million people. We should bear in mind that during this period of general increase, there were always areas that suffered decline—sometimes drastic—because of wars, epidemics, or natural catastrophes. The disastrous decline of American Indian populations after contact with Europeans, caused by disease, conquest, and social disruption, is a case in point. The effect of the slave trade on Africa, although still debated, is another. Sharp population changes usually resulted in profound social and cultural adjustments. Some scholars argue that the slave trade had just such an impact on social and political patterns in Africa.

A second and extremely important transition took place between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries. Initially based on new food resources, this transition often is associated with the Industrial Revolution, when new sources of energy were harnessed. The growth rate greatly increased during this period in the countries most affected. Between 1750 and 1800, the world population grew at a rate of more than 4 percent a year to more than a billion people. By the mid-twentieth century, the world growth rate had tripled, and by 2012, the world population had risen to more than 7 billion.

This **demographic transition** took place first in Europe and is still more characteristic of the developed world. Most premodern agrarian economies were characterized by a balance between the annual number of births and deaths; both were high. Life expectancy usually was less than 35 years, and the high mortality was compensated by high fertility; that is, women had many children. Improvements in medicine, hygiene, diet, and the general standard of living contributed to a decrease in mortality in the eighteenth century. This allowed populations to begin to grow at a faster rate. By the nineteenth century in most of Western Europe, the decline in mortality was followed by a decline in fertility brought about by contraception. In some countries such as France, these two transitions took place at about the same time, so population growth was limited. In much of Europe, however, the decline in fertility lagged behind the decrease in mortality, so there was a period of rapid population growth. Until the 1920s, population growth in Western Europe and the United States was higher than in the rest of the world, especially in the less industrialized countries. In recent times, that situation has been reversed. But many other societies have now experienced a demographic transition.

Some demographers believe that demographic transition is part of the process of shifting from a basically agrarian society

to an industrial, urbanized one and that the improvements in medicine, technology, and higher standards of living will necessarily result in a change to a modern demographic structure. They believe that a decreasing need for children as part of the family economic unit, laws against child labor, and state intervention in family planning will eventually lower the world birth rate and decrease the pressure of population on economic growth. This assumption remains to be proved, and responses may vary greatly from one region of the world to another because of economic conditions and cultural attitudes about proper family size.

Finally, we should also note that responses to demographic transition can vary greatly according to historical conditions. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europe resolved the problem of population growth with an enormous wave of emigration to the Americas, Australia, and various colonies around the globe. Present-day political circumstances make this solution less possible, although the new waves of migration in the global economy may indicate that the process is continuing.

Still, it is clear that a demographic transition is well advanced in many parts of Latin America and Asia and is beginning to take hold in Africa. Mortality has dropped very rapidly since 1950 because of modern medical technology, and life expectancy has doubled. To cite a single example, in Sri Lanka the mortality rate was almost cut in half between 1945 and 1952 simply by eliminating malarial mosquitoes. Fertility has declined in many places in Asia and Latin America, but in Africa, where children continue to have an important economic and social role in the extended family, it remains high. It is difficult to project what demographic transitions will take place in these areas of the world. However, all countries are faced with the problem of balancing their population's growth against the ability of the society to feed and provide an adequate standard of living to the people.

At present, the world's population is growing because of a moderate rate of growth in the industrialized nations and a high rate in the developing countries. In the 1970s, demographer Ansley Coale pointed out that the rate of growth, about 2 percent a year, is 100 times greater than it had been for most of human history. At this rate the world's population would be multiplied by 1,000 every 350 years. The results of such growth would be disastrous. Coale concluded that the present period of growth is transitory. Some people who are concerned with rapid population growth believe that the solution is to limit population growth in the developing nations by state intervention, like China's policy of limiting the number of children per family or through incentives to have smaller families and education about birth control. Others believe that a redistribution of resources from rich nations to poor nations would alleviate the human misery created by population pressure and eventually lead to political and social conditions that would contribute to a gradual lowering of the birth rates. Clearly, demographic questions must always be set in political, economic, and social contexts.

At present, the world's population is growing because of a moderate rate of growth in the industrialized nations and a high rate in the developing countries.

Review Questions:

1. Why do nations differ in their need to control population growth?
2. Why has the rate of population growth varied in different areas of the world?
3. Is overpopulation essentially a biological, social, or political problem?

That authority was also the theme of the magnificent artistic output in ivory and cast bronze that became characteristic of Benin. Celebration of the powers and majesty of the royal lineage as well as objects for the rituals surrounding kingship were the subjects of much of this art. When the first Europeans, the Portuguese, visited Benin in the 1480s, they were impressed by the power of the ruler and the extent of his territory. Similarly, the artists of Benin were impressed with the Portuguese, and Benin bronzes and ivories began to include representations of Portuguese soldiers and other themes that reflected the contact with outsiders (Figure 7.4).

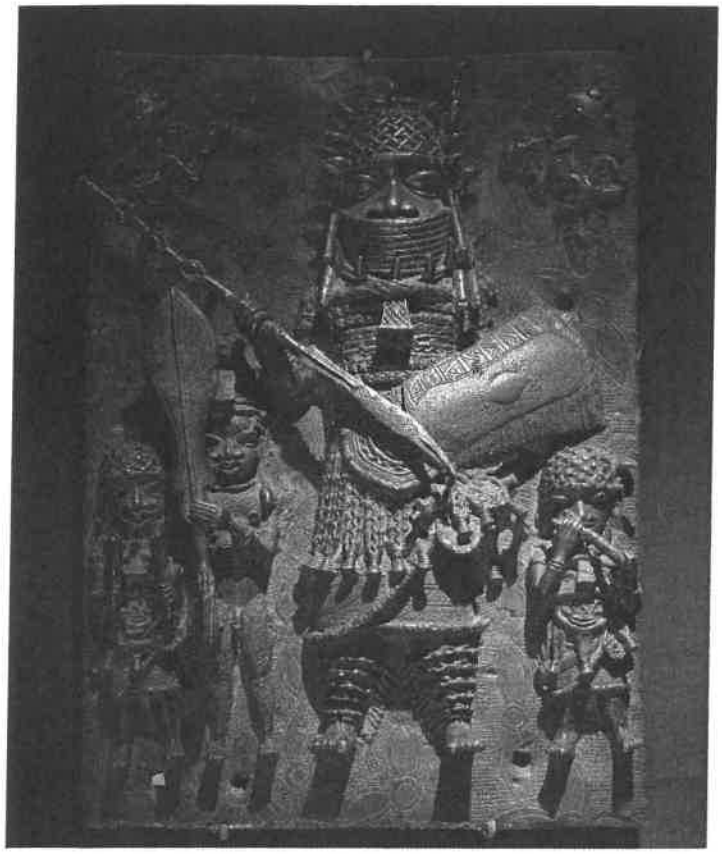
demography
The study of population.

demographic transition
Shift to low birth rate, low infant death rate, stable population; first emerged in Western Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth century.

7.4.2 The Kingdoms of Kongo and Mwene Mutapa

The Bantu migrations discussed in Chapter 2 had brought millions of farming and herding peoples into Central and Southern Africa from their original homelands in Nigeria. In various places they replaced kinship-based societies with new political structures based on kingship supported by ideas of hereditary royal lineages and a kind of bureaucracy. Some of these became powerful states. Beginning about the thirteenth century, another

Figure 7.4



Bronze plaque of Oba and retainers. African rulers often negotiated with the Portuguese on equal terms and incorporated them into local political and commercial networks. In this plaque, the presence of Portuguese retainers—the helmeted figures armed with muskets on each side of the main figure's head—were marks of the Oba's power.

Werner Forman Archive/Museum fur Volkerkunde, Berlin/Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

Kongo
Kingdom, based on agriculture, formed on lower Congo River by late fifteenth century; capital at Mbanza Kongo; ruled by hereditary monarchy.

Great Zimbabwe
Bantu confederation of Shona-speaking peoples located between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers; developed after ninth century; featured royal courts built of stone; created centralized state by fifteenth century; king took title of Mwene Mutapa.

kingdom was forming on the lower Congo River. By the late fifteenth century this kingdom, **Kongo**, was flourishing. On a firm agricultural base, its people also developed the skills of weaving, pottery, blacksmithing, and carving. Individual artisans, skilled in the working of wood, copper, and iron, were highly esteemed. There was a sharp division of labor between men and women. Men took responsibility for clearing the forest and scrub, producing palm oil and palm wine, building houses, hunting, and long-distance trade. Women took charge of cultivation in all its aspects, the care of domestic animals, and household duties. On the seacoast, women made salt from seawater, and they also collected the seashells that served as currency in the Kongo kingdom. The population was distributed in small family-based villages and in towns. The area around the capital, Mbanza Kongo, had a population of 60,000 to 100,000 by the early sixteenth century.

The kingship of the Kongo was hereditary but local chieftainships were not, and this gave the central authority power to control subordinates. In a way, the Kongo kingdom was a confederation of smaller states brought under the control of the manikongo, or king, and by the fifteenth century it was divided into eight major provinces. The word *mani* means "blacksmith," and it demonstrated the importance of iron and the art of working it in its association with political and ritual power.

Farther to the east, another large Bantu confederation developed among the farming and cattle-herding Shona-speaking peoples in the region between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers. Beginning in the ninth century C.E., migrants from the west began to build royal courts in stone, to which later immigrants added more polished constructions. There were many of these *zimbabwe*, or stone house, sites (about 200 have been found) that housed local rulers and subchiefs, but the largest site, called **Great Zimbabwe**, was truly impressive (Figure 7.5). It was the center of the kingdom and had a religious importance, associated with the bird of God, an eagle that served as a link between the world and the spirits. The symbol of the bird of God is found at the ruins of Great Zimbabwe and throughout the area of its control. Great Zimbabwe (not to be confused with the modern nation of Zimbabwe) included several structures, some with strong stone walls 15 feet thick and 30 feet high, a large conical tower, and extensive cut-stone architecture made without the use of mortar to join the bricks together. Observers in the nineteenth century suspected that Phoenicians or Arabs had built these structures, mostly because their prejudices prevented them from believing that Africans were capable of erecting such buildings, but archeologists have established that a Bantu kingdom had begun construction in stone by the eleventh century C.E. and had done its most sophisticated building in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

By the fifteenth century, a centralized state ruled from Great Zimbabwe had begun to form. It controlled a large portion of the interior of Southeast Africa all the way to the Indian Ocean. Under a king who took the title *Mwene Mutapa* (which the Portuguese later pronounced "Monomotapa"), this kingdom experienced a short period of rapid expansion in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its dominance over the sources of gold in the interior eventually gave it great advantages in commerce, which it developed with

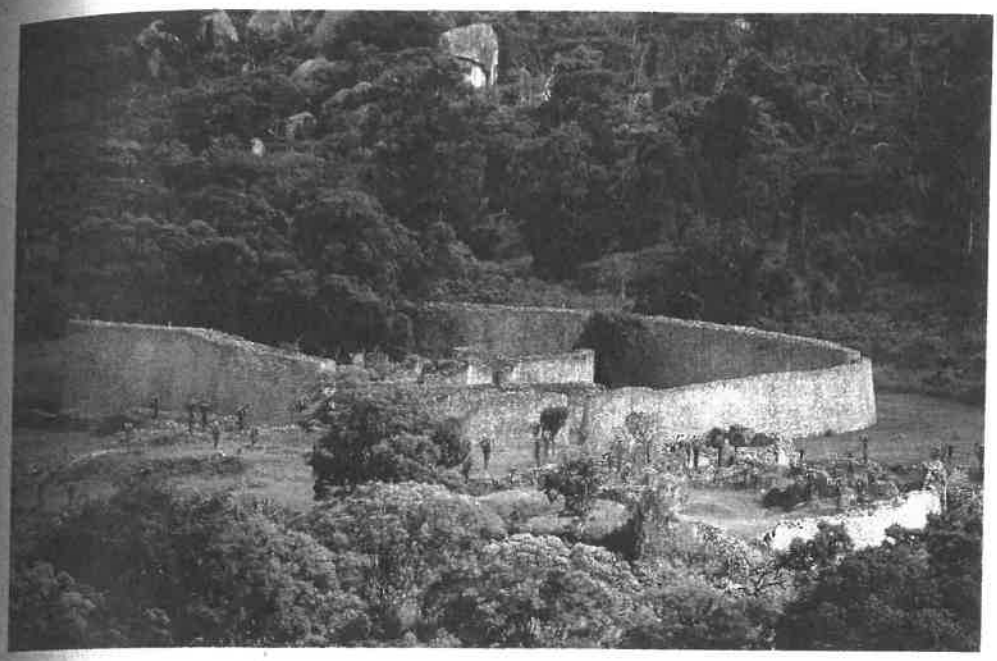


Figure 7.5

Great Zimbabwe was one of several stone settlement complexes in Southeastern Africa. Added to at different times, it served as the royal court of the kingdom. In their search for traces of the non-African people they believed "must" have built these massive stone structures, European explorers and treasure-seekers stripped the site of layers of artifacts that might have told more of the story of Great Zimbabwe.

Nick Greaves/Images of Africa Photobank/Alamy Stock Photo

the Arab port of Sofala on the coast. Evidence of this trade is found in the glass beads and porcelain unearthed by archeologists at Great Zimbabwe. By the sixteenth century, internal divisions and rebellion had split the kingdom apart, and perhaps an emphasis on cattle as a symbol of wealth led to soil exhaustion. Control of the gold fields still provided a source of power and trade. Representatives of the Mwene Mutapa called at the east coast ports to buy Indian textiles, and their regal bearing and fine iron weapons impressed the first Europeans who saw them. As late as the nineteenth century, a much smaller kingdom of Mwene Mutapa survived in the interior and provided some leadership against European encroachment, but pastoralism had come to play a central role in the lives of the Shona people who descended from the great tradition.

Global Connections and Central Themes

Internal Development and Global Contacts

Developments in sub-Saharan Africa during the centuries after 1200 featured a mixture of internal changes, including the spread of strong states in several regions, along with the intensification of contacts, particularly with North Africa and the Middle East. Contacts did not extend, however, to direct interactions with the Mongols: In this respect African history after 1200 differed from patterns in much of Asia and Europe, where the Mongols and their impact had such profound effects. African products did reach the Mongols—for example, through the export of decorative feathers—but only through the efforts of Arab traders. Africans themselves were not involved and were not challenged to reconsider their military and political patterns or their commercial outreach, to the same extent as Asia or Europe.

This chapter has concentrated on the Sudanic states and the Swahili coast, where the impact of Islam was the most profound and where, because of the existence of written sources, it is somewhat easier to reconstruct the region's history. Sub-Saharan Africa had never been totally isolated from the Mediterranean world or other outside contacts, but the spread of Islam obviously brought large areas of Africa into more intensive contact with the global community, even though Africa remained something of an Islamic frontier. Still, the fusion of Islamic and indigenous African cultures created a synthesis that restructured the life of many Africans. Sudanic kingdoms and the Swahili coast participated in extensive borrowing and interactions with North Africa and the Middle East, similar to imitation efforts by several other societies in the postclassical period. Islamic contacts were also heavily involved in the growing integration of several parts of sub-Saharan Africa with global trade.

Although the arrival of Islam in Africa in the period from 800 to 1500 was clearly a major event, it would be wrong to see Africa's history in this period exclusively in terms of the Islamic impact. Great Zimbabwe and the Kongo kingdom, to cite only two examples, represented the development of Bantu concepts of kingship and state-building independently of trends taking place elsewhere on the continent. Similar processes and accomplishments could also be seen in Benin and among the Yoruba of West Africa. Meanwhile in Ethiopia, East Africa, and the Eastern Sudan, the impact of Christianity and the pre-Islamic Mediterranean world had been long felt. The dynamic relationship between the impact of the civilizations and peoples external to Africa and the processes of development within the continent itself was a major theme in Africa's history.

Developments in Africa had their own special characteristics, and of course quite varied patterns emerged. The Sudanic kingdoms, however, warrant particular comparison with several other regions during the postclassical period. They showed the capacity to organize large, although fairly loosely structured, states. They expanded trade and cultural contacts with other civilization centers, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East. They imitated aspects of their contact societies, though quite selectively. They clearly formed a vital part of the expansion of transregional trade, while constructing their own reactions to the other great theme of the period, the spread of world religions.

By the late fifteenth century, when the first Europeans, the Portuguese, began to arrive on the west and east coasts of Africa, in many places they found well-developed, powerful kingdoms that were able to deal with the Portuguese as equals. This was even truer in the parts of Africa that had come under the influence of Islam and through it had established links with other areas of Muslim civilization. In this period, Africa had increasingly become part of the general cultural trends of the wider world. Moreover, the intensified export trade in ivory, slaves, and especially gold from Africa drew Africans, even those far from the centers of trade, into a widening network of global relations. With the arrival of Europeans in sub-Saharan Africa in the late fifteenth century, the pace and intensity of the cultural and commercial contacts became even greater, and many African societies faced new and profound challenges.

Further Readings

Several books are useful in relation to this chapter. The period covered is summarized in Robert O. Collins and James M. Burns, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (2007). Essential reading on Central Africa is Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests* (1990) and his *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa* (2004). A general introduction to the grassland empires of the Western Sudan is presented in David Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa* (2005), while Michael Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (2018) provides an overview of the empires of the Western Sudan. On the Swahili coast, see A. Mazrui and I. Shariff, *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* (1994) which emphasizes language; and R. L. Pouwells, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900*, 2nd ed. (2002). John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili* (1992) Mark Horton and John Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (2000), and Chapurukha Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili City States* (1999) are all good introductions to the topic. On Ethiopia, see Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (1994). Stuart Munro-Hay, *The Quest for the Ark of the Covenant* (2005) delves into the Judaic and Christian origins of Ethiopia. A very good survey of the early history of Africa with interesting comments on the Nok culture is Susan Keech McIntosh and Roderick J. McIntosh's "From Stone to Metal: New Perspectives on the Later Prehistory of West Africa," *Journal of World History* 2, no. 1 (1988): 89–133. Graham Connah, *Forgotten Africa: An Introduction to Its Archaeology* (2004) reveals recent findings in that field. J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder's *History of West Africa*, 2 vols. (1987) contains excellent review chapters by specialists. N. Levtzion's *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (1973) is still the best short introduction to these kingdoms of the Sahel, but more recent are David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (2004), and the essays collected in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels, eds., *The History of Islam in Africa* (2000).

Two good books on the Kongo kingdom are Anne Hilton's *The Kingdom of the Kongo* (1992), which shows how African systems of thought accommodated the arrival of Europeans and their culture, and Koen Bostoan and Inge Brinkman, eds. *The Kongo Kingdom: The Origins, Dynamics and Cosmopolitan Culture of an African Polity* (2018). Joseph Vogel, *Great Zimbabwe: The Iron Age in South Central Africa* (2004) is a good starting point, David Birmingham and Phyllis Martin's *History of Central Africa*, 2 vols. (1983) is an excellent regional history.

Two multivolume general histories of Africa that provide synthetic articles by leading scholars on many of the topics discussed in this chapter are *The Cambridge History of Africa*, 8 vols. (1975–1986); and the UNESCO *General History of Africa*, 7 vols. to date (1981–).

Some important source materials on African history for this period include three translations of the Mande epic *Sundiata:* David C. Conrad and Djanta Tassey Conde's *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples* (2004);

D. T. Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (1986); and Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute, *Sunjata: Gambian Versions of the Mande Epic* (2000). Other sources include G. R. Crone, ed., *The Voyages of Cadamosto*, 2nd series, vol. 80 (1937), which deals with Mali, Cape Verde, Senegal, and Benin; Maylin Newitt, ed., *The Portuguese in West Africa 1415–1670* (2010); and Ross Dunn's indispensable edition of *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (1990). Arab sources are translated in Nehemia Levtzion and Jay Spaulding, *Medieval West Africa: Views from Arab Scholars and Merchants* (2003).

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What were the products of Africa that attracted international trade, and what did Africans want in return?
2. How did the expansion of Islam affect African societies?
3. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of politically decentralized societies with those that had monarchies or other forms of hereditary rule.