

New technologies often produce unexpected or unintended changes in social relations. Describe two technologies that have changed societies we've studied (for example by changing the way one group of people relates to another, or the way men and women related to each other, or the way power was organized in a community). This question understands "technology" very broadly, as meaning anything from a new animal, a new tool type, a new method of getting food, etc.

New technology has always forced new progress and change throughout history. Social roles, political structures, and economic markets have grown throughout history with the development of new technology like agriculture and iron. Agriculture allowed for the development of social roles to allow women and men to have gendered positions within the community, and political structures surrounding the significance of hunters. Iron technology influenced the economic and political development in the Kingdom of Meroe, and it also aided the social dynamics within Bantu communities.

Agriculture allowed for the development of permanent societies and the beginning of a social hierarchy. The political structure of the Botawe grew with agricultural development. Agriculture aided this development when specialization in food production began. Prior to the cultivation of agriculture, everyone was involved with hunting and gathering of food. Men hunted the big game and women gathered plants and nuts. "Women, since they controlled both the production and the preparation of food, could contribute in major ways to the status of the entire family or wider kin group."¹ Women were largely responsible for handling the preparation of the food. This was significant because it gave women a certain level of power. Women and men worked in harmony together and helped each other create a more developed society.

¹ Christine Saidi, "Women's authority and society in early East-Central Africa," Rochester NY: U Rochester Press, 2010

However, with the cultivation of agriculture, hunting became more of a specialization and an identity with great respect within the community. The hunters symbolized both groups of actual upstarts and hyperbolic “ideal man.”² This quote demonstrates the high position, within the community, that the hunters possessed. There is linguistic evidence to show that the word “padu” means hunter.³ However, this word had different meanings throughout time. According to linguistic sources, the word padu meant elder, friend, and companion at various points throughout early Bantu history.⁴ All of these words are used with high respect and esteem for the person in question. With this word also meaning hunter, it further reinforces the idea of power and respect. However, it is important to note that there was a decentralized power structure within these Bantu communities. The power dynamic between the hunters and the other leaders was polar opposite. There was a network of obligations.⁵ This was significant because it was a striking characteristic of these Bantu communities.

There was a social significance to iron as well. The gendering of iron production is significant to the culture of the early Bantu communities. The women were not allowed to smelt the ore themselves because it was considered taboo to have menstruating women near the iron while it was being smelted.⁶ They believed that it would ruin the iron ore.⁷ Men were involved with the smelting of ore but there are clear female influences. The kiln was shaped like a woman’s womb and men treated the process as sacred, similar to a birth. The men were committed to the kiln and to the ore during smelting so men were forced to abstain from sexual

² Kathryn de Luna, “Hunting Reputations: Talent, Individuals, and Community in Precolonial South Central Africa,” *Journal of African History* 53, 03, 2012

³ De Luna, “Hunting Reputations: Talent, Individuals, and Community in Precolonial South Central Africa.”

⁴ De Luna, “Hunting Reputations: Talent, Individuals, and Community in Precolonial South Central Africa.”

⁵ De Luna, “Hunting Reputations: Talent, Individuals, and Community in Precolonial South Central Africa.”

⁶ Saidi, “Women's authority and society in early East-Central Africa.”

⁷ Saidi, “Women's authority and society in early East-Central Africa.”

activity of any kind, for fear that it would be seen as betraying the iron itself. This demonstrates the social and cultural significance of iron to these Bantu communities.

It is important to note that iron was influential as well for slightly different reasons. Iron smelting is a process that was developed in modern-day Turkey. Iron smelting has a very specific, and intricate process of extracting iron ore.⁸ To understand the significance of iron and its effects, it must also be understood that by simply cultivating this technology, it proves that the African continent was dynamic and changing. Iron influenced the economy and structures of communities across northern and central Africa.

The economy of the Kingdom of Meroe demonstrates the significance of iron. There was power in iron working knowledge.⁹ Meroe started as a small town in the southern Nubian area of Lower Egypt. However, in part due to the extensive natural resources like timber which is critical to the smelting of iron, and because of its specialization of iron production, it was able to become a powerful, independent kingdom, separate from Egypt.¹⁰ There was a monopoly on iron production. The Kingdom was able to capitalize on the trade, increasing revenue for Meroe. The Kingdom of Meroe was able to control the trade and that was good because they held all the power. With this power, they became a powerful trading ally of Egypt. Iron was so significant to the economy that historians theorize that the Kingdom fell when the iron production was no longer viable. This fall may be caused by a depletion of the resources necessary to smelt the iron or by the widespread knowledge of iron production, making their monopoly weak.¹¹

In conclusion, the development of technology has always inspired progress in civilizations like the Botawe, Bantu, the Kingdom of Meroe. The cultivation of agricultural

⁸Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, St Martin's Press: New York, 1995 Chapter 3 and 4

⁹ Shillington, *History of Africa*. Chap 3

¹⁰Shillington, *History of Africa*. Chap 3

¹¹Shillington, *History of Africa*. Chap 3

practices and iron smelting technology allowed for significant changes to the social structure of both men and women, creating a balance of power, for the most part, between the two genders. Men were hunters and women were gatherers before the development of agricultural practices. Iron production was a gendered process as well. Men were directly involved with the smelting of iron but women had power in that they influenced the culture and spirituality of the smelting. The economy as well as the political power of the Kingdom of Meroe grew with the production of iron. Iron was the cornerstone of their economy. Its production allowed them to become powerful trading partners with Egypt. This powerful alliance and relationship contributed to their political power.

Trans-Saharan trade both contributed to and resulted from social change in West Africa. Discuss how Trans-Saharan trade was shaped by changes within West African society, and how and why trade precipitated social change. You could, for example, talk about trade in different commodities, the circulation of people, or the circulation of ideas or practices. Be specific about dates, locations, and peoples involved.

The trading in Trans Saharan Western Africa was the years long process that allowed for the exchange of ideas, goods, and people. This created a linkage between spread out and diverse communities. This process was significant in the creation of empires like the Empire of Mali, the Empire of Songhai, and the Kingdom of Ghana. The exchange of goods and commodities like gold, salt, and camels were critical in the development of these empires and kingdoms as well as their economies. The spread of Islam through Western Africa through trading along the Trans Sahara proved to be incredibly influential for generations to come.

Gold was a rare and valuable metal that helped with the development of a currency. Gold was largely a symbolic metal because it is soft so it was not good for making tools. A symbol of a well-developed culture was its own currency. The ruler of the Empire of Mali, Mansa Musa, was a great thinker. He was famous for education and knowledge. He traveled along the Sahara to Alexandria to study religion. He famously spent so much gold over an extended period of time that it destabilized the Egyptian economy.¹² This demonstrates how important and influential gold was to the economy, and by extension the trading in Trans Saharan Western Africa. Salt was valuable to the trade in Trans Saharan Africa. Salt preserved meat, making food last longer thus creating a more stable food supply. In the Empire of Mali, external trade was very important to the economy.¹³ The gold mines were to the south and the salt fields were to the north. There was

¹²Rachel Sandwell. Lecture Week 8.

¹³ Sandwell. Lecture Week 8.

a deep respect for these mines and fields. The Empire could have colonized, and overtaken the area but they did not.¹⁴ This was due to a deep understanding of the environment and the people who mined the area. They believed that taxing and colonizing the area would lead to the mines and fields to deplete themselves.¹⁵ The trading along the Trans Saharan in Western Africa contributed to the culture and value placed on the gold and salt.

Camels were important to the development of the trading in Trans Saharan Africa. While they did not originate in Africa, their introduction was critical. Prior to the camel, traders would use cattle.¹⁶ The camel transformed the desert from a vast, difficult terrain to a land mass to travel. The camel needed such little water for long periods of time that traveling across the desert became easily plausible. The camel could carry up to 250 pounds of goods.¹⁷ The camel was highly effective in carrying such high quantities that it allowed for trade to flourish. The Kingdom of Ghana's economy hinged on trade and the introduction of camels allowed the economy to flourish. This was influenced because of the Trans Saharan trade in Western Africa.

Islam is arguably the biggest idea to come out of the Trans Saharan trade in Western Africa. By the 8th century, Northern Africa was firmly an Islamic region.¹⁸ The Empire of Mali was deeply influenced by the religion of Islam. Their ruler, Mansa Musa, went on a pilgrimage to Mecca and when he returned, he built a great mosque in Timbuktu.¹⁹ In the Empire of Mali, the urban regions were heavily influenced by Islam. However, the spread of small, rural areas allowed for localized, specific interpretations of faith. Within these localized communities there were variations in the use of space, time and visual culture itself. There were different shrines and sites of pilgrimage. There were differing holidays and celebrations between regions. The

¹⁴Sandwell. Lecture Week 8.

¹⁵Rachel Sandwell. Lecture Week 8.

¹⁶Kevin Shillington, History of Africa, St Martin's Press: New York, 1995 Chapter 6

¹⁷Rachel Sandwell. Lecture Week 7, October 13th, 2020

¹⁸ Sandwell, Lecture Week 7

¹⁹ Sandwell. Lecture Week 8.

people created amulets and jewelry for their religion.²⁰ In the Empire of Songhai, there was a deep respect for Islam that spread from trading along the Trans Sahara. In fact, the powerful leader, Sonni Ali, who ruled from 1464-1492 was very unpopular with the urban communities in the Empire. Similar to the Empire of Mali, the urban centers were deeply devout to their faith and the people living in these areas despised Sonni Ali.²¹ There were rumors of Sonni Ali being an “insufficient Muslim.” He drowned not soon after these rumors. His successor was defeated by Askia Muhammed. Under the Askia Dynasty, there were a number of raids and jihads against the Mossi.²² This demonstrates the significant influence that Islam has over the Empire of Songhai. When Mali fell, Timbuktu fell under the Empire of Songhai starting in the 14th century. Timbuktu was a desert trading town but through the Trans Saharan trade, it grew to being a center of knowledge and influence under the Empire of Songhai.²³

In conclusion, Trans Saharan trade in Western Africa influenced the culture of the Empires of Mali, Empire of Songhai, and the Kingdom of Ghana. The gold and salt trade were very influential in shaping the economy and culture surrounding precious commodities and goods. Gold, and the development of other currencies like cowries, demonstrated the progress these empires had made. A form of currency was an indicator of a well-developed society. Salt helped stabilize the food supply. Both had cultural significance to the Empire of Mali. The camel was significant to the trade and shaping the scope of the Trans Saharan trade in Western Africa. Ghana was especially influenced by the camel. Islam was spread along with the other goods and commodities. Islam had a large influence over the culture and societies of the empires and kingdoms of Western Africa.

²⁰Rachel Sandwell. Lecture Week 9, October 26th, 2020

²¹Sandwell. Lecture Week 9, October 26th, 2020

²² Sandwell. Lecture Week 9, October 26th, 2020

²³Shamil Jeppie, “Re/discovering Timbuktu” in *The Meanings of Timbuktu* eds Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008 page 1

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- HIST 200, Rachel Sandwell, Lecture Week 9, October 26th, 2020