

AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS: FROM THE PRE-COLONIAL TO THE MODERN DAY

Toyin Falola and Tyler Fleming

Department of History, University of Texas at Austin, USA.

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Summary

This chapter argues that African civilizations underwent many changes since the continent's first set of people began the process of state formation. Though African civilization was and remains extremely diverse and varied, this chapter uses the common experiences of Africans in general to provide an analysis of civilization throughout the African continent. The chapter stresses the resiliency and ability of the African peoples to adapt from early state formation to the present day. It demonstrates how Africa was generally harmed by Western influence from the dawn of the transatlantic slave trade to colonial domination to disproportionate commerce in today.

1. Introduction

Though Westerners often tend to view it as one “country” and lump its peoples together as Africans, Africa is a huge continent (second only to Asia). These generalizations oversimplify African civilizations and the continent’s diversity. African environments are incredibly diverse, from dry deserts to dense rain forests. Some are conducive to trade, others are surrounded by rich mineral resources, while others possess rich soil suitable for farming. Africa's peoples and civilizations have adapted to these environments differently. As a result, today's Africa consists of more than fifty countries with a total population exceeding 660 million people speaking more than 800 languages. As a result of the continent’s vast diversity, it is rather difficult to address African civilization as a cohesive whole but, once accepting its diverse nature, one can make qualified generalizations about its history and civilizations, which we attempt to accomplish in this essay.

People have lived in Africa for more than three million years, and thus it possesses a rich and varied history. On one hand, Africa is widely believed to be the birthplace of modern human beings and is where some of the world's greatest civilizations, such as the Egyptian and Nubian societies, emerged. On the other hand, this history includes the indignation of trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonial domination. African civilizations, cultures, and traditions are often assumed by outsiders to be static and unchanging. This belief, however, is untrue as African "tradition" has constantly been in a state of flux. Societies from the ancient to the modern day have changed, adapted, and evolved as time progressed. Environments and climates have altered over time, such as the Sahara desert that was once a fertile grassland but began losing rainfall around 2000 BCE, and civilizations have adapted to these changes.

2. Pre-colonial Societies

Though people have lived in Africa quite some time, the use of iron tools marks the significant moment of African civilization. Iron tools enhanced weaponry, allowed groups to clear and manage dense forests, plow fields for farming, and basically better everyday lives. Ultimately, iron tools allowed Africans to flourish in every environment, and thus they could live in larger communities which led to the formation of states and kingdoms. With state formation came the formation of modern civilizations with common languages, belief and value systems, art, religion, lifestyle and culture.

Unlike most Euro-Asian civilizations, African societies favored oral tradition and few possessed written languages. Stories and oral histories documented the past, and were handed down from generation to generation. The oral-based linguistic past of Africa remains promising and problematic in documenting Africa's pre-colonial past, as many of these oral histories have either been forgotten or distorted after being retold by each passing generation. Without the luxury of written sources, Africanist scholars of this era have had to be creative in discovering new sources to document the continent's pre-colonial past. As research in genetics, archaeology and linguistics increases, we will know more about early African civilizations. This is not to say, however, that we know little. Linguists have used similarities in language structures to formulate the directional flow of pre-colonial migrations. There are four African linguistic groups (Khoisan, Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo (commonly referred to as Bantu). Linguistic similarities exist in Bantu languages from Nigeria to Mozambique. Peoples, such as the Zulu, Fang, Shona, Kikuyu, Swahili, Tswana, Herero, and Kongo, all are Bantu-language speakers and their languages share similarities in structure, grammar, and key words. In Africa today there are more than 400 Bantu languages all linked together, similar to the number of European languages derived from Latin. This has led most scholars to conclude that most sub-Saharan Africans came from the same ancestors that migrated throughout the continent from the Niger-Congo area. Prominent pre-colonial African civilizations were Egypt, Nubia, Ghana, Mali, Carthage, Zimbabwe, and Kongo. In West Africa, the empires of Sudan, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai all flourished. In Southern Africa, Great Zimbabwe emerged as the most complex civilization throughout Southern Africa. In East Africa, plateau regions were suitable for cattle grazing. The dense forests of the Congo Basin, on the other hand, made herding nearly impossible. Other states, empires, and kingdoms dissolved throughout the era. In Central Africa, the Kongo, Loango, Ndongo, and Tio states

dissolved by the mid-seventeenth century as economic, military and political systems shifted due to the slave trade's impact.

Ancient Egypt though was the first major African civilization. By 4000 BCE, Egyptians had begun cultivating crops. Five hundred years later, these peoples evolved into the early Egyptian states, and formed the great Egyptian civilization (with the unifying of Lower and Upper Egypt) in 3200 BCE. Egyptian society was complex. From the building of massive pyramids that still stand today to the development of hieroglyphics (a complex written language), to the creation of the plow, it profoundly shaped world civilization. Despite Egypt's early success, it was not until after 700 CE that sub-Saharan African empires could emerge and exist for longer periods of time. With no society or civilization possessing a greater technological advantage, Africa's greatest empires fizzled and ultimately fell apart, often being replaced by another. Mali succeeded Ghana, and the Songhai followed Mali. Usually each empire improved upon the social, political, commercial, and military organization established by their predecessors, albeit in sometimes very different ways and over various parts of West Africa. By 1000 CE, states and civilizations emerged and thrived throughout the continent. These societies varied in structure as they evolved to suit local environmental, political and social situations.

As time went on, West African societies grew into organized states that encompassed more of the area and its peoples. A map of Lower Guinea coastline (modern Ghana) from the early seventeenth century details close to forty different nation-states or kingdoms existing in the area. Roughly 120 years later, however, these states had merged to form one state, the Asante empire.

In Southern Africa, the peoples of modern day Zimbabwe and Zambia created elaborate civilizations. Exploiting the mineral wealth of their land, these peoples traded with their neighbors and ultimately established a large network through the area. These societies built permanent stone structures and houses over all of Africa. Great Zimbabwe was established around 1250 CE.

Unique from other continents, some parts of Africa do not receive enough rainfall to grow large surpluses of domesticated crops, and population densities remained low as land could not produce enough food to support larger populations. As a result, pre-colonial civilizations were often more mobile societies that could move to more fertile land or closer to water supplies when needed. This was particularly true in the Eastern and Southern regions of the continent as well as in the Sahel and desert regions of West Africa.

Pre-colonial communities were never completely isolated. Interaction between neighbors, across regions, and even outside of the continent were common. Societies interacted with one another through commerce, marriage, migration, diplomacy and warfare. Their fertile land, trade routes, or cattle forced interaction with other communities. East Africa was in contact with Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Indian traders. Portugal established Elmina (in modern day Ghana), its first African trading outpost, in 1482. Commerce was instrumental in state formation. Trade offered the ability to exchange local surpluses for rare foods and goods. Across the Saharan desert

and along the Swahili coastline of East Africa, vast trade networks developed. World renowned marketplaces and massive cities emerged at trade crossroads, such as Zanzibar and Timbuktu. For instance, it is estimated that Kumbi, a large city in the Western Sudan, possessed a population of 15 000 to 20 000 by the eleventh century. Kings and leaders, such as those of Ghana, controlled their areas' local markets and received tributes from traders. Camels and donkeys connected distant societies, and allowed trade to occur across the Sahara. Areas with mineral wealth, such as Great Zimbabwe, developed mining capabilities and traded these for manufactured goods from overseas.

With this said, there were more than 10 000 states and kingdoms before the arrival of the Europeans, and African civilizations varied greatly in size and structure. The structure can be divided into centralized and decentralized societies. In centralized societies often run by monarchs or rulers, authority was in the hands of an elite few that decided laws, collected taxes, etc. These societies tended to develop in areas conducive to agriculture or trade. The degree of power possessed by the emperor or monarch varied from group to group with some societies bestowing over-riding decision making responsibilities to the monarch while other leaders possessed more of a symbolic status. The creation of divine rulers did not lead to the formation of structured states, but instead it was often the establishment of strong states that craved stronger governmental structures that necessitated the use of monarchs as leaders.

In decentralized civilizations, such as the Igbo of modern day Nigeria and Kikuyu of Kenya, these societies were often broken up into age group systems, and power was dispersed throughout the entire community with local elders providing leadership but with input from the population at large. Some groups, such as the San of Southern Africa and the Pygmy of Central Africa, formed small, mobile groups of hunter-gathers that rarely ever grew larger than a handful of families. Hunting and gathering, herding cattle and goats, and agriculture were the primary means of food production throughout pre-colonial Africa. The earliest societies were hunter-gatherers. These groups often consisted of small kinship units that moved to follow animal herds or search for sources of water. However, with advancements in technology, civilizations developed ways to domesticate both animals and crops, and these advancements produced more regular levels of food. Food surpluses were more common, larger populations could be better supported, and thus, agriculture and herding soon became the dominant means of food production. As arable land came at a premium, farming or herding societies often pushed hunter-gatherers off of their land. Consequently, hunter-gatherers lost out on the best land, and such lifestyles became more difficult to maintain as time wore on. Even though agricultural societies could produce greater surpluses of food, farming was far from simple in most regions. These civilizations usually relied heavily on human manpower and metal tools. In many parts of Africa plow animals were susceptible to the tsetse fly, and thus it was nearly impossible for farmers to maintain needed numbers of plow animals. As in most societies throughout the world, African diets centered around a staple crop, such as maize, yams or bananas. Certain foods, such as cassava and banana, were not native to Africa but instead were introduced by European and Asian traders, flourished in Africa, and even replaced local foodstuffs as the staple of local diets in some cultures. In most African societies, all of the people were looked after and taken care of in some manner. Unemployment and homelessness were rare.

Successful families traditionally allowed poorer ones to use portions of their land or lent them cattle in exchange for a portion of a crop or other goods. Concepts of wealth and entitlement, however, varied a great deal. In West and Central Africa, it was not uncommon for nobles, royalty, and political leaders to amass great fortunes, own slaves, and live in large family compounds. The Dinka of today's Southern Sudan, on the other hand, functioned in a society that held little regard for personal ownership over land or material things. They lived a lifestyle where flooding prevented wealth from being transferred from generation to generation, and thus the accumulation of wealth was unimportant. By 1500, essentially all of Africa was controlled by indigenous inhabitants. Later European explorers and settlers often argued that territories were unsettled upon their arrival and thus were ripe for the taking, but these assumptions were misguided. Often land had been abandoned due to poor soil quality, infrequent rainfall, or had been claimed for future use.

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Biographical Sketches

Toyin Falola was born in 1953 in Ibadan, Nigeria, and studied history at the University of Ife (Ibadan), receiving his BA (1976) and PhD (1981). He is the Frances Higginbotham Nalle Centennial Professor in History at the University of Texas at Austin. He has written and edited numerous articles and books over his career. His most recent books include *The Power of African Cultures* (2003), *Economic and Political Reforms in Nigeria* (2004) and *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* (2004). Currently, he is the co-editor of *African Economic History*. He is also editor of three series: Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora, Culture and Customs of Africa, and Classic Authors and Texts on Africa.

Tyler Fleming was born and raised in Middletown, Connecticut, USA in 1979. He studied history at Allegheny College (Meadville, Pennsylvania) where he graduated with a BA (2001). He is currently a doctoral candidate in African history at the University of Texas at Austin (Austin, Texas) where he has received his MA (2003). His major field is popular culture in South Africa.

He has recently returned from South Africa where he was a visiting scholar at the University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) on a Fulbright III fellowship for postgraduate research. Previously, he was a teaching assistant in history at the University of Texas at Austin. Besides his Fulbright grant, he has also received numerous awards and grants including a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad fellowship, a Foreign Language Area Studies fellowship, and the University of Texas at Austin's Patrice Lumumba fellowship for African History. He has published in entries and book reviews in various encyclopedias and journals. His most recent publication was a journal article (co-authored with Toyin Falola) entitled "Africa's Media Empire: Drum's Expansion into Nigeria" in *History in Africa*, 32 (2005) 133-164.