

SUBSAHARAN AFRICA BEFORE 1600

An understanding of African history before AD 1600 must be based on an appreciation for the role of geography. Although the geography and environments of Africa did not “determine” the course of African history, they laid the framework within which African peoples created their various civilizations by influencing agriculture, natural resources, communications and culture.

SIZE OF AFRICA

Africa is a vast continent, much larger than Europe, containing a wide range of ecological environments. To speak of “African civilization” is thus inaccurate, since many of the peoples living in the different regions of Africa had no direct communication with each other in premodern times. Indeed, the people of Zimbabwe and Kilwa on the southeast coast of Africa had much more contact with the peoples of Arabia, India, and China than they did with the inhabitants of the Niger river valley in west Africa. As will be discussed below, although there are no common linguistic or religious bonds that united all Africans in premodern times, there are broad cultural characteristics that most premodern subsaharan Africans shared.

DIVERSITY IN ECOLOGICAL ZONES

In order to understand African history, it is vital to have a basic understanding of the main features of African geography.

North Africa. The coastal regions of North Africa are distinguished by a Mediterranean climate, with adequate rainfall and reasonable agricultural potential. Isolated from subsaharan Africa by the Sahara Desert, this region was culturally apart of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilizations.

Sahara Desert. The Sahara Desert, the largest in the world, separates North Africa from the rest of the continent. Although for the most part uninhabited, in premodern times there were various Berber bedouin tribes who migrated among the oases and semi-arid regions. There is another swath of desert, the Kalahari, in the southwestern part of Africa, but does not spread across the continent.

Nile River. In the eastern part of the Sahara is the Nile River valley. Only here could an agricultural civilization develop based on irrigation and the annual flooding of the river.

Subsaharan Savanna. South of the Sahara stretches a zone known as the savanna, or steppe, a broad grassy plain, broadly similar to the Midwest of the United States and suitable for herding and agriculture. However, the amount of precipitation is barely enough to sustain a civilization, making it susceptible to problems when the rainfall declines in a series of years.

Tropical Forest. A vast zone of tropical forests is found on the west African coast and the Congo river valley.

Major Cultural Regions. Despite the problems of geography and lack of natural advantages, differing degrees of civilization grew in Africa. The main cultural zones brought by these diverse civilizations are North African, Egyptian, northeast Africa including the upper Nile and Ethiopian highlands, western Africa including the western savanna and open woodland, and southern and eastern Africa.

Geographic isolation from the rest of world. While the Middle East and Europe developed civilizations in North Africa and fought over control of the lower Nile, the Sahara Desert cut off the rest of the continent from outsiders. Before the domestication of the camel, the Sahara made it impossible for others to communicate with the southern part of the continent. Contact by sea was made impossible by the prevailing northern winds, which made sailing difficult until the advances in sailboats made by the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century. In the southeast, the Arabs and Asians made contact with the Africans, but communication was limited to only a few trading opportunities.

Ethnology of Africa. Although Africa is often thought of as the continent of blacks, in reality it has very complex and diverse mixture of ethnic groups. In the north and northeast we find Semitic people, now largely Arabic speaking, but originally included numerous Phoenicians and Jews. In fact, Amharic, the major modern language of Ethiopia, is a Semitic language. The Sahara region is inhabited by Berbers and Egyptians. Black Africans, the majority ethnic group (perhaps 70 percent of all Africans), inhabit most of Africa south of the Sahara.

RELIGION IN AFRICA

Religion played a dominant role in culture, society, law and intellectual life in all premodern societies; it was frequently the unifying and definitive cultural characteristic of premodern peoples. Sub-Saharan Africa was no different in this regard. While there were small numbers of Christians and Muslims in southern Africa, the southern Africans largely kept their own polytheistic religions.

AFRICAN POLYTHEISM

What is frequently called African polytheism or animism (the worship of spirits) is in fact a complex array of religions, often varying widely in doctrine and practice. Each of the hundreds of African communities and linguistic groups had its own unique religion. Nonetheless, there are a set of related characteristics found in most African polytheisms.

Supreme God. Traditional African religion was polytheistic, with a vast number of gods, goddesses, and lesser spirits. There was also a widespread belief in a supreme god, the true creator and ruler of the universe. The various spirits of the lesser gods were often seen as manifestations of a single supreme power.

Divine Kingship. Another widespread belief was the divine or semidivine nature of kingship. Throughout Africa kings were seen as possessing sacred power. This power derived from noble birth, control of the rituals necessary for communication with the gods, and from the king's own power and charisma as shown by prosperity and victory in battle. The divine status of the kings was seen in numerous widespread African practices, such as secluding the king from contact with commoners, elaborate court ritual, sacrifices and taboos.

Shamans. African religion often centered on the powers of mediums and prophets. Certain individuals, usually including the king, were thought to have special access to the spirit world. Although frequently called "witch doctors," they are now generally described as shamans. African shamans could use their access to the spirit world for healing, foretelling the future, and cursing. Animal sacrifice to obtain power over or from the spirits and gods was widespread in African religion.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUBSAHARAN AFRICA IN WORLD HISTORY

Africa's relationship with the rest of the world was dependent on its relative geographical isolation, which meant that its global interaction and role in cultural exchange and development was somewhat limited. Nonetheless, Africans contributed to the development of world civilization in a number of important ways.

Contacts with the Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Corridor. Egyptian merchants and slavers first penetrated beyond the first cataract before 3000 BC. From then on, Egyptian influence and occasionally political power spread south up the Nile and down the Red Sea coast. By the late second millennium BC, ships from Egypt were beginning to make their way south of the Horn of Africa.

Trans-Saharan Corridor. The earliest record of trans-Saharan contacts with North Africa date to about 1000 BC, when horse-drawn chariots apparently crossed the Sahara. In the first century AD camel caravans began to cross the Sahara. By the coming of Islam in the seventh century, caravans crossed the Sahara nearly every year. Through trade with Muslim merchants, the people of southern Africa were brought into commercial contact with all parts of Eurasia. Muslim armies also occasionally intervened in African affairs.

The Coming of the Europeans

Early Contacts. After the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Islam, Europeans were cut off from direct cultural and economic contacts with sub-Saharan Africa for almost 1000 years. Although some European merchants sailed the Red Sea and thus may have contact with the Africans in the Horn region, the first direct sustained contact of Europeans came in the late fifteenth century.

Portuguese Explorations. The development of new sailing ships allowed the Portuguese to navigate south into the head winds. By the 1460s they had explored the Gold Coast of West Africa. In 1488 they rounded the southern tip of Africa, and in 1497-98 explored the east coast of Africa and reached India.

Beginnings of European Colonization. The Portuguese established trading forts on the Gold Coast, in the Congo and at Mozambique on the east coast. These trading forts were established as ports for

ships on their way to India, to control the gold-for-salt trade from the interior, as missions for the evangelization of Africans and as slaving posts. Despite several military expeditions into the interior, the Portuguese were generally unsuccessful in penetrating deep inland: the total number of Portuguese in Africa never exceeded a few thousand men. They did, however, manage to transform the previous trading patterns and increase the slave trade. By 1650, Dutch, English and French merchants were beginning to intervene in Africa.

SLAVERY IN AFRICA

The Africans were not the first people enslaved by another people. Slavery existed throughout the premodern world, in every civilization since Mesopotamia. In sub-Saharan Africa the Egyptians were the first to enslave these people. The Greeks, Romans and Muslims also found a labor resource in the black African. African soldiers participated in the campaigns of Ramses into Syria, Xerxes' invasion of Greece and in Roman imperial armies. African slaves played a large role in the Islamic conquest of North Africa, and in many instances were given freedom for bravery in battle and some rose to positions of prominence in the new Muslim civilizations. However, the European slave traders brought slavery in Africa to a new level.

European slavery. Just as the European arrived on the continent, the major cultural regions were in the midst of civil wars that had weakened their societies. As the European arrived and found the people fighting without gunpowder weapons, they viewed the Africans as barbaric. In addition, the European questioned the intelligence of the African for being willing to trade gold for salt. The lack of Christianity among the people also gave the Europeans reason for viewing these people as less than civilized. At first, the European began paying opposing warlords for their prisoners to supplement labor in Europe. However, this practice was limited because of the growing population of Europe, and the lack of need for it. Therefore, the early slave trade did not disrupt African civilization. Then, as the need for labor increased with the settlement of the new world, the Europeans stepped up their efforts to enslave the African. The result was devastating to the political, economic, and social conditions in southern Africa. The increased demand for slaves led to continual warfare among the different groups of southern Africans, as these black communities attacked each other in search of slaves to sell to the Europeans.

PRE-COLUMBIAN AMERICA

Background. Pre-Columbian American civilizations represent something of a paradox for world historians, since they do not fit the traditional Old World models of civilizations. The cultures of Mesoamerica (modern Mexico and Guatemala), for example, attained levels of cultural development comparable with those of the Old World, yet remained at a neolithic technological level until the ninth-century AD. The cultures of South America nestled in some of the world's highest mountains, likewise developed to levels as sophisticated as the Old World, but without a written language. Thus the study of pre-Columbian societies is invaluable not only for its own sake, but as a test for theories about patterns of world history.

Geography. The American hemisphere includes examples of every type of climatic and geographical environment on Earth. Arctic tundra dominates the far north. In southwest North America we find extensive deserts; the Amazon is a region of vast tropical rain forests. Interestingly, pre-Columbian civilizations often developed in some of the more difficult types of terrain: the harsh deserts in the southwest U.S., tropical forests in the Peten, and mountain highlands in the Andes. Oddly, civilizations of the Indians in the fertile and temperate Mississippi River valleys – which in many ways are more fertile than the Nile, Indus or Yellow rivers – were among the less sophisticated in the New World.

There are several major geographical features which had an important effect on pre-Columbian civilizations. The entire hemisphere is divided by a series of mountain ranges running north to south: the Rocky Mountains in North America, the Sierra Madre in Mesoamerica, and the Andes in South America. The major river systems are the Amazon in South America and the Mississippi in North America. Pre-Columbian civilizations can be divided into three cultural zones, roughly corresponding to North America, Mesoamerica and South America.

Limits of Knowledge. Pre-Columbian civilizations remain largely prehistoric; we lack written records for most of their history. No surviving writing systems ever developed in North and South America.

Mesoamerica, on the other hand, did have a hieroglyphic writing system. Unfortunately, most pre-fourteenth century Mesoamerican records were destroyed by a combination of natural decay, Spanish vandalism and religious suppression. A study of pre-Columbian civilizations before the fifteenth century is therefore largely dependent on archeological data, which leads to hypothetical and, sometimes, controversial conclusions about this time period. New discoveries lead to sometimes rapid changes in the structure of pre-Columbian American history.

Pre-Columbian contacts with the Old World. Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492 is often misunderstood. In fact, he was by no means the first person from the Old World to visit the western hemisphere. The Bering straits in Alaska remained a pathway for primitive fishermen to sail between Asia and the Americas throughout pre-Columbian times. The Vikings established small colonies in eastern Canada in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but the long-term impact was very limited and the colonies ultimately disappeared. There is also controversial evidence of possible Phoenician, Roman, Irish, Chinese, Japanese and South Asian contacts with the New World. Although uncertain, the possibility that Old World ships were blown off course in storms and marooned in the New World should not be discounted. But whatever the exact nature of these possible early pre-Columbian contacts with the Old World, Columbus' discovery was unique. Columbus established the first permanent and extensive contact between the Old World and the New World. His location in the heart of the advanced regions of Mesoamerica allowed him, and later other Spaniards, to develop political and economic activity in a region that had already developed advanced political and economical traditions. The Americas also possessed a geographical advantage for economic activity that Europeans quickly identified and exploited. Therefore, Columbus radically transformed the nature of all civilizations on earth.

NORTH AMERICA

Throughout the pre-Columbian era, most regions of North America were inhabited only by hunters and gatherers. Following the end of the last Ice Age, climatic changes and overhunting by humans contributed to the extinction of many of the large mammals (such as mammoths), which had served as the main source of food for many of these hunting bands. This causes human groups in some regions to develop specialized hunting and gathering techniques for particular environments. Although there were variations and changes in technologies and lifestyles throughout pre-Columbian times, most parts of North America remained at a hunting and gathering level of social organization.

In two regions of North America, however, civilizations did develop: among the Indians of the Southwest, and the Woodlands cultures of the Mississippi and Ohio River systems. Although these groups never reached the levels of sophistication found in Mesoamerica or South America, their achievements are nonetheless noteworthy.

MESOAMERICA

Historians and archeologists divide Mesoamerican history into five periods: Archaic (7000-1500 BC), Formative (1500 BC – AD 150), Classic (150-900), Early Postclassic (900-1250) and Late Postclassic (1250-1519). Many of these periods are further subdivided into early, middle, and late phases. Mesoamerican civilizations have the following broadly shared characteristics:

Agriculture. A complex, intensive, and highly organized agricultural system developed by the Classic period, including extensive use of swampland (raised field system) and lakes (*chinampas*, or "floating gardens," i.e. raised fields in a lake). Agriculture was based on three principle crops – corn, beans and squash – and a wide range of specialty crops. Very few domesticated animals were used for food.

City-States. Although larger political units could be found, Mesoamerican civilization centered around the city-states and temple centers. Urban life was highly developed; Teotihuacan had as many as 250,000 people, making it not only the largest city of pre-Columbian America, but one of the largest cities in the premodern world. Also, the Aztecs developed their capital city of Tenochtitlan into a major metropolis of over 100,000 people. Most people lived in smaller agricultural villages which were religiously, culturally, economically, and frequently politically dependent on one of the larger cities.

Temples. A large portion of the resources of Mesoamerica was devoted to the construction of temple, which served as centers of religious, cultural and intellectual life. The ball game – a mixture of sport, ritual and divination – was also found throughout Mesoamerica.

Calendar. Most Mesoamerican civilization shared dual calendar systems of 260- and 265-day cycles; many shared related systems of hieroglyphic writing.

Neolithic Technology. Although some metal was used, especially for ornamentation, most tools in Mesoamerica were made of stone.

Transportation. No draft animals were available; transportation was by foot or canoe. Though the wheel was known, it was rarely, if ever, used for transport.

Trade. Trade was extensive throughout Mesoamerica; each major city-state had a large market plaza as part of its monumental architecture. Some international trade appears to have occurred with North and South America.

RELIGION OF MESOAMERICA

Gods and Goddesses. There are a bewildering array of gods and goddesses in Mesoamerican mythology, who generally recognizable only by their artistic representations. Many of their names are not known today; they are prosaically called “god 1” and “god 2.” The major deities existed in several forms among the various people of Mesoamerica. Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent) was one of the more beneficent gods of Mesoamerica, who gave humans the gift of civilization and law; Tlaloc was the god of rain and water; Tezcatlipoca (smoking mirror), the god of warfare and human sacrifice, was the mythical opponent of Quetzalcoatl; Xilonen was the goddess of maize (corn).

Human Sacrifice. A morbidly fascinating element of Mesoamerican religion was the widespread practice of human sacrifice. It is certain that the Mesoamericans sacrificed more humans than any other civilization in history. The blood of human sacrifice was seen as the food of the gods, and it was necessary to appease them. Volunteer peasants were taken to the tops of temple pyramids, where their hearts were cut out and offered to the sun; their blood was poured over the sacrificial priests as a type of baptism; the flayed skin of the dead bodies was occasionally worn by priests as ritual clothing; skulls of sacrificed humans were hung on racks by the thousands; the flesh of the victims was distributed and eaten. For many of the volunteers, to be sacrificed was seen as the greatest honor, ensuring a happy afterlife with the gods; others, who were forced into being sacrificed, saw matters slightly different. Nearly 80,000 people were said to have been sacrificed by the Aztecs at the dedication of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan in 1487. Even if this figure is exaggerated, hundreds of people were sacrificed each year. The cultural vandalism of the Spanish, who destroyed most of the books and much of the architecture of Mesoamerica, is a great blow to historians who are interested in studying this fascinating ritual. However, given their medieval Christian perspective, it is perhaps understandable that they could interpret these elements of Mesoamerican religion as demonic.

The Ball Game. Even Mesoamerican sports were religious, and associated with the great temples. The ball game was the universal sport of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. At one level it was simply a sporting event, a mix of soccer and basketball, in which two opposing teams attempted to bounce a rubber ball through hoops or to an opponent’s goals, without using their hands. But on a ritual level, the ball court was a cosmic diagram of the universe; the game itself was great ritual mythological drama; the players represented the gods in mythological conflict; the course and outcome of the game were interpreted as prophetic of future events; the losers were often sacrificed to the gods.

SOUTH AMERICA

South America is a vast continent with a wide range of environments. The two dominating features of South American geography are the Amazon River basin and the Andes mountain range. The Amazon drainage basin – one of the largest river systems in the world – covers most of the northern half of South America. It is characterized by dense tropical rain forests. Grassland and subtropical forests predominate in the southeastern zone, with a large area of semidesert covering much of modern Argentina. The northwest (modern Colombia and Venezuela) includes a complex mixture of mountain highlands, tropical forests, grassland, the Orinoco River Basin and desert. The Andes mountains run like a spine along the western coast of the continent. Surprisingly, it is here that the great pre-Columbian civilizations of South America developed.

THE INCAN EMPIRE

The largest, most splendid, and last of the civilizations of the Andes was the Incan empire. The Inca were originally one of the numerous small city-states which developed in highland Peru following the

collapse of earlier dominant empires. For several centuries the Inca were simply a small chiefdom at their city-state of Cuzco. It was not until 1438 that imperial expansion began. Under their greatest ruler, Pachacutec (1463-1471), the Inca conquered most of highland and coastal Peru. Expansion continued under his son Tupac Yupanqui (1471-1493), who doubled the size of the empire by military conquest of parts of modern Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile.

However, the empire became short lived. Upon the death of Incan ruler Huayna Capac in 1525, a civil war broke out between his two sons, Huascar and Atahualpa. In this unstable position, Atahualpa invited Francisco Pizarro and his few hundred Spanish conquistadors to assist him as mercenaries in 1531. Instead, Pizarro decided to conquer the Inca empire. By a combination of guile, treacher, murder, bravado, military superiority and sheer good fortune, Pizarro managed to crush the Inca in only two years. Although Indian resistance continued in various regions for decades, the Spanish soon ruled all of the Andes, which made their conquest of Mesoamerica and South America complete.

THE COLLAPSE OF PRE-COLUMBIAN CIVILIZATION

The early collapse of the Olmec is paralleled throughout pre-Columbian history by other similar collapses of civilizations: Teotihuacan, the classic Maya, the Toltecs, the cultures of the Southwest, the Woodland Indians and several South American cultures all collapsed after periods of cultural brilliance. This may indicate that pre-Columbian political units were organized on a fragile and sophisticated social, economical and ideological basis that could not withstand severe disruption.

But whatever the inherent weaknesses in pre-Columbian societies, the coming of the Europeans brought disastrous consequences to the American Indians, which are unparalleled in world history. Moving beyond the internal dynamic of the rise and fall of civilizations, the Europeans brought about the nearly complete eradication of Indian cultures. The following are the most important factors in the destruction of the pre-Columbian civilizations.

Disease. Certainly the greatest calamity which befell the Indians was the introduction of new European diseases to which the Indians had no biological resistance. It has been estimated that in the century following the arrival of the first Europeans, smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis killed as many as 80-85 percent of the Americas. This was the most devastating plague in the history of the world, more than twice as deadly as the Black Death plague in medieval Europe.

Technology. The Europeans had superior technology, including steel weapons, firearms, horses, and cannons. The pre-Columbians could not compete with these military technologies, nor with the industrial technologies which produced these weapons. The Spanish conquistadors Hernan Cortes and Pizarro were brutal men, but brilliant and bold conquerors. The numbers were few, but they were well disciplined and highly motivated in their search for gold and glory.

Capture of Divine Kings. The invasion of the Spaniards, both in Mesoamerica and Peru, was a complete surprise, both culturally and strategically. The Indian worldview simply could not accommodate such an event. For a while, the Aztecs saw Cortes as the reincarnation of their god Quetzalcoatl, a fact which Cortes used to great advantage. The culture shock which afflicted the Aztecs and Incas gave the Spaniards the opportunity to consolidate their positions. Both Cortes and Pizarro had the good fortune to conquer the emperors of the Aztecs (Montezuma) and the Incas (Atahualpa). As both societies saw their rulers as divine kings, the capture of the king paralyzed resistance.

Rebellion. Both the Aztec and Incan empires were tyrannies, ruling over oppressed peoples who initially welcomed and supported the Spaniards as liberators. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519, the Tlaxcala, one of the tribes subject to the Aztecs, immediately joined the Spanish army with thousands of soldiers. Their hopes for liberty were short-lived, since Aztec tyranny was simply replaced by Spanish tyranny. Nevertheless, it was the combination of the rebellions by oppressed peoples, in conjunction with the Spanish invasion, which destroyed the Aztec empire.

Religion. From the pre-Columbian religious perspective, defeat by the Spanish was tantamount to defeat by the god of the Spaniards. Through his military victory, the god of the friars had demonstrated that he was more powerful than the god of the Aztecs or Inca. The logical extension of this idea was that pre-Columbian Indians came to accept the new, more powerful god of their conquerors. In the process, they ended up largely abandoning their own ancient cultural heritage, and creating the new civilization of Hispanic Latin America – a combination of the Indian heritage with the new religion, ideas, plants, animals, practices and technologies of Europe.