

Africa and the Islamic World to the End of the Nineteenth Century

AFRICA BEFORE THE GREAT SCRAMBLE

Africa is the second most populous continent on the globe. It is characterized both historically and in modern times by wide political, economic and cultural diversity. A glance at some aspects of this diversity provides an African perspective on the significance of the great European rush for territory that took place at the end of the nineteenth century.

Regions and Peoples: Some Generalizations

Africa consists of several distinctive regions. A brief consideration of some of them will help in placing the peoples who will be described in later sections.

Northern and Western Africa. The Maghreb (northwestern coastal area), with abundant rainfall, is particularly fertile. The economy of its ancient Berber (Caucasian) population was basically agricultural, but a merchant economy also developed. Because of this trading contact, the Berbers mixed readily with blacks who had migrated to the Sudan and West Africa.

South of the coastal region is the largest desert in the world, the Sahara, which spans nearly the entire northern half of the continent. The southern Sahara merges into the Sudan – an area dominated by plains and grasslands. It was the home of such important early kingdoms as Ghana, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu. West and south of the Sudan is the great tropical forest region, forming a somewhat narrow band along the West African coast. Near the Congo River, it extends inland to the center of the continent. The important kingdoms to develop in this forest region included Ghana, Benin and the Yoruba states.

Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. In eastern Africa, the region of Ethiopia is an extremely rich, fertile highland. From there one of the major tributaries of the Nile flows northward, and the Nile itself flows across Egypt. Along the banks of the Nile is a narrow strip of especially fertile soil, which provided the agricultural base for one of the world's greatest ancient civilizations. East of the Ethiopian highlands, bordering on the sea, is a dry plain known as Somalia, which provides a bare livelihood for the nomadic herdsmen who still make up a large part of its economy.

Much of Africa south of Ethiopia consists of high, grassy plateaus. Also located there are the Zaire and Kasai river systems as well as the great lakes, Victoria, Tanganyika, Malawi, and others. In the region of Victoria and Tanganyika are heavy-forested areas. More tropical rain forest forms a thin line along the eastern coast from the equator south. Inland from this narrow strip are more high grasslands and steppes (areas with few trees), extending almost to the southern tip of Africa. Across the continent, the lower western coast contains another desert, the Kalahari. The southern tip of Africa is known as the Cape of Good Hope.

The peoples of Africa are made up of numerous language and ethnic groups. Their origins are obscure, but many people in central and southern Africa are descended from ancient tribes who participated in a long series of interior migrations. As migrants settled in different regions, the cultures they developed varied greatly, as did their languages – hundreds of them. The languages seem to have a common origin, however, and those who speak them are often classified as Bantu-speaking peoples. The economies of all Africa's regions were basically agricultural, although important trading activities provided some economic ties centuries before the Europeans arrived. The trading activities also contributed to considerable ethnic mixing.

The Trans-Sahara Trade. Long before the sixteenth century, a thriving trans-Saharan trade grew between the Sudan, northern Africa and the people in the rain forests of West Africa. It developed most fully after the eighth century, when the camel came into use and revolutionized desert transportation. Agricultural products of all sorts were involved, but the most important commodities were gold and salt. Gold was produced in several places in West Africa, and became important not only as an export but also for ornamenting the elegant dress and furnishing of West African royalty. However, salt was considered just as valuable, for it was in short supply in other parts of the Mediterranean world and in the Sudan. Often mined by slaves, it was found in rich abundance at several sites in the Sahara. Islam came to the Sudan partly as a result of the development of this trade.

Kingdoms Large and Small: A Few Examples.

Before the nineteenth century, Africa saw the rise and fall of numerous kingdoms, some large, some small. The most important, historically, was ancient Egypt. Powerful kings or princes with near-monarchical powers and centralized government ruled some African states; others might be described as confederations of tribes loosely bound together because they paid tribute to a common king. Some states as well as tribes were held together principally by family and kinship ties.

The Maghreb. Early in the Christian era, the people of the Maghreb were under the domination of the Roman empire, which spread Christianity to the area. With the Arab conquests of the seventh century, however, the Muslim faith was established, entirely replacing Christianity. Eventually most this area, except Morocco, was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire.

Axum, Ethiopia, and Christianity. One of the great ancient kingdoms in northeastern Africa was Axum. In the fourth century, one of its most powerful kings, Ezana, converted to Christianity, and by the sixth century most of the kingdom was Christian. Characterized by strong Coptic (Egyptian) influences, this was the distinctive form of Christianity found there when European traders and missionaries intruded into Ethiopia over 1,000 years later. The kingdom of Ethiopia was composed, in part, of intermingled descendants of Axumites and Cushites. It was a powerful state at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but incursions from several sources created disorder and weakness. At one point Jesuit missionaries tried to establish Roman Catholicism, but they were expelled in 1633; Coptic Christianity remained the basic European faith. In later years, Ethiopia was the only major African state to retain its independence from a European takeover, even though Italy had strong ambitions there.

Kanem-Bornu and Hausaland. Another early kingdom, located in north central Africa in the region of Lake Chad, was Kanem, which flourished from about 800 to 1300. Kanem became a great Muslim state, with a commercial economy based largely on the slave trade. After its decline another kingdom, Bornu, rose on its heels and remained a powerful state through most of the seventeenth century.

Further west, meanwhile, the Fulani people were overrunning Hausaland, an area consisting of numerous small, but powerful, states. Constantly at odds with each other, these states were finally united by the Fulani as the result of an Islamic jihad early in the nineteenth century.

Ghana and Mali. On the west coast of the Sudan, the kingdom of Ghana (not to be identified with the present state of Ghana) flourished from the eighth to the beginning of the thirteenth century. An extremely wealthy commercial empire, it traded in salt and gold (both produced elsewhere). Politically it was one of those strong confederations in which the tribal rulers paid tribute to the king. After the decline of Ghana, the kingdom of Mali took its place and expanded. Mali was ruled much like Ghana, except that a standing army was created to secure the power of the king.

Songhai. Mali went into decline in the fifteenth century, to be replaced by the rising kingdom of Songhai. This great commercial empire was in large part the creation of a member of the Sunni dynasty, Ali, who began his reign in 1464 and immediately set out on a conquest of the entire region. He captured the important commercial cities of Timbuktu and Jenne and in 1468 and 1473, respectively. By the time of Ali's death in 1492, Songhai controlled all the great trading and cultural centers of the Sudan. His successor, the Muslim Askia Muhammad Toure, strengthened the administration of the state by establishing a centralized government. He also divided the empire into regions, appointing administrators over each, and created a strong standing army. Under Muhammad Toure the city of Timbuktu gained increased stature as an important Islamic center of learning and faith. The city was also economically prosperous and the home of many artisans, craftsmen and merchants.

Songhai slowly declined in the sixteenth century. One factor in the decline was the rise of European trade along the western coast, which began to interfere with the overland trade with Morocco. In 1591, therefore, the sultan of Morocco sent an army across the desert that quickly defeated the Songhai. After this defeat, the area broke into numerous small tribal states, constantly at war with each other. In the process, they fed the rapidly growing slave trade along the Gold Coast, which soon became one of the great slave markets of the world.

The Forest Kingdoms.

A number of important kingdoms rose and fell in the West African forest region. One was a confederation of Yoruba states known as Oyo, which flourished between the fifteenth and late eighteenth centuries. At that time civil strife began to undermine whatever unity these states had, and the area was taken over by the British in the late nineteenth century.

Benin. East of Oyo, the well-known Edo kingdom of Benin reached the peak of its grandeur in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its culture was characterized by great art work, particularly in bronze

and ivory. Among the first West African states to be influenced by European contacts, by the end of the fifteenth century it had begun to trade with the Portuguese. European influence, including Christianity, was not as great here as in some other places, but some of the Edo princes did study in Lisbon. A variety of internal weaknesses led to its decline and eventual absorption by the British in 1897.

Dahomey. Influenced much more profoundly by European incursions was Dahomey (west of Oyo), which arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1730, it was conquered by Oyo and remained a tributary state until it regained its independence 100 years later. In the meantime, its leaders cooperated with the Europeans in promoting the slave trade, reluctantly at first but under the pressure of economic necessity. More than any other state, Dahomey eventually decimated its own interior population through slave raids. Its economy became almost dependent on this slave trade.

The Ashanti Union. Farther west, the Ashanti kingdom resulted from a union of smaller states in the late seventeenth century. It expanded in the next two centuries, extending over most of modern Ghana. At the same time, the Fante union was attempting to challenge the growth of Ashanti, but it never achieved the same unity. Ashanti eventually developed a powerful, centralized state.

Eastern Africa

In eastern Africa, many kingdoms had come and gone by the time the Europeans arrived. The most extensive, Mwena Mutapa, built by Bantu-speaking people who had migrated into the area centuries before, arose in the general area of modern Zimbabwe. A highly cultured, wealthy area, it declined in power after Portuguese contact. It was soon taken over by a new set of rulers, the Changamire, who remained strong until the 1830s.

European Influence and the Slave Trade

Before the fifteenth century, the most direct outside influence on the African people came from Islam. Beginning early in that century the European quest for wealth and a new route to Asia brought unsettling new influences that eventually had a profound effect on the continent's culture and political structure.

Europeans In Search of Wealth. The Portuguese came first, establishing a foothold on the Moroccan coast in 1415. Gradually they moved down the west coast of Africa, established a few stations, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and ranged up and down the east coast. Mozambique became the only permanent Portuguese foothold there. In the early sixteenth century they had established a great commercial empire in the East, with African stations as major supports. In the process, they also discovered that Africa had many riches for the taking – especially gold and slaves.

The Portuguese were soon followed by the Dutch and later followed by the English and French. The latter two groups were attracted by the slave trade, which became important to the development of their colonies in America. Eventually they took over much of the slave trade, except for the Portuguese foothold in Angola, in the southwestern Africa.

European Influence. Throughout most of Africa European contact was minimal until the nineteenth century. European incursions were, in fact, successfully resisted in many areas. But there were inevitable influences, especially along the Gold Coast of West Africa. Many small communities were transformed into active trading centers. In some cases this changed the political structure of the area by bringing to power new princes who gained economic strength through cooperation with the Europeans. These princes resisted European incursions into the interior, but they happily cooperated in coastal commerce.

Europeans also had an influence on the lives of some African peoples by introducing a number of new products into their diets and their trading systems. Maize and cassava, for example, became staples in some areas. The Europeans also introduced Africans to tobacco and alcohol. Other new products included jewelry of various sorts and firearms. In exchange, the Europeans took away gold, ivory, animal skins, spices and slaves. Eventually the slave trade overshadowed all other economic attractions, even gold.

The Slave Trade. Even though the Europeans were responsible for the evils of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they did not introduce slavery as such to the Africans. In some areas, it had existed since ancient times. Prisoners of war were sold into slavery. The early Muslim conquests contributed something to that process, for Islam justified the enslavement of infidels. Long before the Europeans came, many slaves were working in mines and on farms, though for the most part they were employed in households. In some cases, they were even appointed as advisors to kings and thus enjoyed considerable prestige.

The Europeans brought a new dimension to the slave trade. In some areas the trade had little effect, but in parts of West Africa whole populations were diminished to a mere fraction of their original

strength. Slavery also brought a new set of values – it was not just prisoners of war who would be enslaved, but one’s own people or the people of neighboring tribes. In some cases new social classes arose, as powerful African families or trading houses began to dominate the trade.

It has been estimated the total number of slaves exported from Africa, mostly to the Americas between 1450 and 1900, exceeded 11 million. Perhaps the worst horror of the slave trade was the infamous “middle passage.” Slave ships were designed for maximum efficiency, which meant that slaves were shackled and virtually crammed into tiny individual compartments with room only to lie down. They were seldom, if ever, taken on deck for air. It was rare that a slave ship could make the trans-Atlantic voyage of several weeks without many deaths. Added to all of this was the indignity of being branded and then auctioned off at an American slave market.

Attempts to Repress the Slave Trade. Beginning with Great Britain, by the middle of the nineteenth century there was a strong movement toward abolition of slavery. Among the most vigorous early agitators in Britain was former African slave, Olaudah Equiano, also called Gustavus Vasa the African. In 1807, the British parliament outlawed slavery, making it illegal for any British subject to participate in the practice. The following year, the United States outlawed the slave trade, though not slavery itself. But the trade continued clandestinely as long as there was a profit to be made. Britain then set about putting pressure on other Western governments also to outlaw slavery. France made it illegal in 1815, and other nations began to put some restrictions on the trade. Their efforts were largely ineffective.

Opposition to Abolition. Surprisingly, much of the opposition to abolition came from Africans themselves. There were varieties of reasons, but many had become accustomed to slavery as an economic fact. Efforts to persuade them to find alternative trade goods went largely unheeded, especially when it was clear that abolition could be an economic disaster not just for individuals, but for whole states.

Slave Treaties. Late in the 1830s, the British began to negotiate treaties with individual African chiefs. In return for subsidies, the chiefs agreed to work for the abolition of the slave trade in their own areas. In addition, Christian missionaries and other traders began to work with interior peoples in an effort to move them toward agriculture and alternative trade.

The Holy Wars and New African States

The Jihads. Religion played another role in the nineteenth century, this one related to Muslim imperialism. Muslims were living peacefully beside Africans practicing their own native religions, but the Africans were losing political power. In some cases, they were also losing their right, or ability, to conform to certain Muslim standards. Reformers among the Muslims, therefore, became dismayed. This resulted in a violent series of jihads at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth century. The most successful occurred among the Fulani in Hausaland, beginning in 1804. Its leader, Usman dan Fodio, was a learned Muslim teacher who wanted to restore the pure principles and practices established in the days of the Prophet. By the time his successor, Muhammad Bello, died in 1837 the holy war had resulted in a new Muslim state that was still intact when the British took over the area. There were other Sudanese jihads – one in Macina, west of Hausaland, that took place about the same time; another began nearby in 1851 and eventually came in conflict with and overwhelmed Macina. Similar uprisings took place elsewhere, some ending more successfully than others.

Zulu. Many other new states arose in Africa before the onslaught of European colonialism. One was the great Zulu nation in southern Africa, formed by Bantu-speaking peoples as they came into conflict with each other in their expanding quest for land. Several of these tribes were united for the first time under a brilliant military strategist named Shaka, who ruled from 1818 to the time of his death in 1928. Shaka developed a highly disciplined military, even organizing women into fighting regiments. One of his great innovations was a short spear that his soldiers used for stabbing rather than throwing – that way they would not only be more accurate but would also not lose their weapon after one throw. Shaka’s conquests, known as the *Mfecane*, affected Zulu people for thousands of miles around. They devastated many areas and set in motion mass migrations to other parts of the continent. Some of these groups wreaked havoc of their own as they marched across the territories of other people. The Zulu nation later came into conflict with the Boers after their Great Trek to the interior.

THE NEAR EAST IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth century witnessed the total collapse of the Old Islamic world order in the face of European economic and military imperialism. India was completely conquered and remained a British colony for nearly a century and a half. Iran remained independent but was reduced to economic and military impotence. Central Asian Islamic khanates were overwhelmed and conquered by the Russians. North Africa was colonized by the French, while Islamic societies in western and eastern Africa became European colonies. Nearly all of the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman empire rebelled and obtained independence during the nineteenth century. Although the Ottoman empire survived it, too, was reduced to military impotence and saw one of its prize provinces, Egypt, first become an independent state and later a British colony. By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the Islamic world was directly ruled by European elites, while those regions which remained independent, Iran, Afghanistan, and the core of the Ottoman empire, all came under European domination.

Challenges to the Ottoman Empire

The West. Muslim leaders were able to ignore their deteriorating situation until Napoleon's invasion of the Ottoman province of Egypt in 1798. His quick defeat of the Egyptian army brought the military weakness of the Islamic world into sharp focus. This was no longer a case of European powers nibbling on the edges of the Islamic empires; Napoleon had struck at the heartland of the Islamic world. He was expelled only by an Ottoman alliance with England. Thereafter, the Ottomans became increasingly dependant on military aid and technology from Europeans.

Internal Rebellions. The Ottoman empire also faced a series of internal rebellions. In the early nineteenth century, various Christian regions of the Balkans rebelled with European encouragement and achieved independence from the Ottoman empire. In Arabia, a fundamentalist Islamic rebellion led by the Wahhabis united many of the bedouin tribes, winning several victories over the Ottomans and temporarily capturing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Druze in Lebanon and the Armenians also revolted, leading eventually to a series of bloody massacres. The most serious threat to the Ottomans came from Muhammad Ali in Egypt.

Muhammad Ali and Egypt. Muhammad Ali was an Albanian Muslim mercenary in Ottoman service who emerged as the most powerful man in Egypt following the expulsion of the French in 1801. In 1805, the Sultan appointed him pasha (ruler) of Egypt. In the following years, he consolidated power against his nominal Ottoman lords by suppressing rival bands of warriors and confiscating large estates, creating state monopolies on many of Egypt's most lucrative products.

Muhammad Ali, sometimes called the "father of modern Egypt," was the most successful of early modern Muslim reformers. He instituted land reform, a tax system, and government along European lines, laying the foundation both for prosperity and government finance. He brought Egypt into the world economy, making it one of the world's major producers of cotton. Modern printing presses and education systems were introduced. Finally, Muhammad Ali reformed the military along European lines, making Egypt the most powerful state in the Near East. During his reign, Egyptian forces successfully campaigned in the Sudan, Arabia, Syria and Anatolia. He was prevented from overthrowing the Ottoman Empire by French and British intervention. The French and British did pressure the Ottomans into recognizing the hereditary right of Muhammad Ali's family to rule Egypt. In actuality, the Ottomans had practically no power at all left in Egypt.

The British Take Over Egypt. At the death of Muhammad Ali in 1848, Egypt was the most powerful state in the Near East. A series of events over the next several years led to a decline of Egyptian power and an eventual British takeover. Muhammad Ali's successors did not have military and administrative genius; many proved to be competent. The completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 made Egypt of vital strategic importance to the British as a link to their colonies in India and Africa. But modernization, including the canal, proved to be very costly, which led to a major foreign debt. When the world cotton market collapsed following the reopening of the United States cotton trade to the world market after the United States War of Unification, Egypt's cotton industry collapsed and Egypt was unable to repay its international debts. In 1875, Egypt defaulted on its loans and the British took control of state finances and the Suez Canal. After putting down a nationalist uprising in 1882, Britain made Egypt a protectorate.

The Demise of the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, only the Ottoman Empire remained as an important independent Muslim state. Nonetheless, the Ottoman state was in a gravely weakened condition and retained its territory in the face of European expansionist threats only through close military ties to Germany. Ottoman rule lasted in Libya until 1911, when Italy annexed it after declaring war on Turkey. In the end, continuing Ottoman efforts at reform proved too few and too late. In the twentieth century, a group of liberal known as the “Young Turks” deposed their autocratic ruler and instituted more reforms. During the First World War, they made the mistake of joining the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. After the war, the empire was broken up and occupied by foreign powers. From its ruin arose a new Islamic state, the Republic of Turkey. It was formally recognized in 1923.

Islamic Reaction to European Domination

Westernization. Many Near Easterners attempted to copy the social, political and military structures of the West. Agriculture and industry were reformed based on European models; land was distributed from landlords to peasants. Military, legal and government systems were Westernized. Parliaments and European-style law codes were introduced. In many ways these reform efforts were of limited success, affecting only the educated elites. On the other hand, substantial advances in agricultural productivity, health care and education were made. Government liberal and democratic reforms were frequently superficial, with military cliques holding the real core of power.

Resistance. Some Muslims, while recognizing the value of Western technologies and social reforms, were unwilling to accept the European political and economic domination which often accompanied reform. Opposition to Europeans manifested itself on many different levels. Near Eastern governments had frequent wars with Europeans, which they invariably lost. Smoldering discontent would occasionally surface in anti-Western disturbances and riots. Nonetheless, the Europeans’ superior technology and military power was sufficient to allow them to maintain control in the Near East.

Islamic Fundamentalism. Much of the resistance to Western imperialism in the nineteenth century manifested itself as Islamic Fundamentalist movements. The most famous was the uprising in the Sudan under Muhammad Ahmad, who declared himself the long-awaited Mahdi (Messiah) in 1881. The Mahdist state lasted until 1898, when it was overthrown by the British. Followers of this movement still play an important role in the politics of modern Sudan. The Wahhabi movement in Arabia (1746-1818) was initially directed against the Ottomans. In its later manifestations in the twentieth century, it culminated in the creation of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These and other related movements represent a trend toward radical anti-Westernism, which is still an important force in the Near East. Although most Muslims did not participate in these extremist movements, it is clear that the Islamic religion as whole withstood a century and a half of European imperialism. Few Muslims converted to Christianity, and the basic Islamic beliefs and practices remain a fundamental element of most Near Eastern countries.