

African Societies: Diversity and Similarities

The continent of Africa is so vast and the nature of 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 the diversity and lack of political unity over long periods of time.

Unlike 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 supporters in Africa and sometimes contributed to formation of large states and empires. Amid the diversity of African cultures, it is also useful to note certain similarities in language, thought, and religion that provide some underlying unities. The spread of the Bantu-speaking peoples provided a linguistic base across much of Africa, so even though specific languages differed, structure and vocabulary allowed for a mutual understanding between neighboring communities.

The same might be said for the animistic religion that characterized much of Africa. The belief in the power of natural forces personified as spirits or gods and the role of ritual and worship. The practice of worship often appeared in the form of dancing, drumming, divination and sacrifice. Worshipping influenced their actions and this was a central part of African religion. African religions had well defined concepts of good and evil. Evil have to be combated, which led to the existence of diviners or priests who guided religious practices and helped protect the community.

Ancestral worship was also a major part of African life. It was believed that the African ancestors were the first settlers and therefore owners of the land or the local resources. Through their ancestors the fertility of the land, the herds, the people, and the game could all be protected and ensured. Deceased ancestors were often a direct link between the living and the spirit world.

1. What are some of the similarities that most Africans share?
2. How does religion impact the lives of the Africans?

The Arrival of Islam in North Africa

Africa, north of the Sahara had long been part of the world of classical antiquity, where Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Vandals traded, settled, built, battled, and destroyed. The Greek city of Cyrene in modern Libya of the great Phoenician outpost at Carthage in Tunisia attest to the part North Africa played in the classical world. After the age of the Pharaohs, Egypt had become an important part of the Greek world and then later a key province in the Roman Empire, especially valued for its grain.

By 670 CE Muslims ruled Tunisia and Arab and Berber armies had crossed into Spain. The message of Islam found fertile ground among the populations of North Africa. Conversion took place rapidly within a certain political unity provided by the Abbasid Dynasty. This unity eventually broke down and North Africa divided into a number of separate states and competing groups.

Islam offered a number of 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 enforcing 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.

1. How was Africa introduced to Islam?

Ghana

It is generally accepted that the ancient state of Ghana emerged sometime around the 7th century AD. Fueled by its economic vitality, the kingdom of Ghana rapidly expanded into an empire. It conquered local minor states, requiring tribute from these subordinate vassals. This tribute, however, was not the main form of Ghana's wealth. Ancient Ghana boasted a mixed economy of extensive agriculture; iron smelting, stonemasonry, carpentry, pottery, goldsmithing, and cloth manufacturing. A strong trade emerged in goods that passed from western Africa east to Egypt and the Middle East. This trade primarily involved gold, salt, copper, and even war captives to be sold as slaves.

The kingdom of Ghana never converted to Islam, even though northern Africa had been dominated by the faith since the eighth century. The Ghanaian court, however, allowed Muslims to settle in the cities and even encouraged Muslim specialists to help the royal court administer the government and advise on legal matters. Unlike the Ghanaians however, their northern neighbors fervently converted to Islam. In 1076, The Berbers calling themselves Almoravids, declared a holy war, or jihad, against the state of Ghana. The Almoravids destroyed the kingdom, converting a great deal of northern Ghanaians. After this however Ghana ceases to be a commercial or military power. It was to be Mali who would later form a new empire.

1. How did Ghana become a powerful empire?
2. How did Ghana fall?

Mali

The Almoravid revolution, however, led to energetic Islamic proselytizing all throughout the Sahel. Many of the ruling families converted to Islam. One of these ruling families, the Keita, forged the successor to the Ghanaian kingdom, the kingdom of Mali. Mali was built off of the monopolization of the trade routes from western and southern Africa to eastern and northern Africa. The most lucrative of these monopolies was the gold trade. Mali was located farther south than Ghana; the Malians lived in an agriculturally fertile land. Mali was also located along the upper Niger River.

The historical founder of Mali was the magician, Sundiata, one of the most legendary figures in African history. Sundiata ruled Mali from 1230-1255. Sundiata seized the major territories through which gold was traded and so built the foundation off of which Mali would be built. He also introduced into the region the cultivation and weaving of cotton. Sundiata was a brilliant leader whose exploits served as the foundation to a great oral tradition. This oral tradition was spread by Griots, professional oral historians who served as keepers of traditions and advisors to kings. His stories are still told to this day.

The most significant of the Mali kings was Mansa Musa (1312-1337) who expanded Mali influence over the large Niger city-states of Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenné. Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim who built magnificent mosques all throughout the Mali sphere of influence; his gold-laden pilgrimage to Mecca made him an historical figure even in European history writing.

It was under Mansa Musa that Timbuktu became one of the major cultural centers not only of Africa but also of the entire world. Under Mansa Musa's patronage, vast libraries were built and Islamic universities were endowed; Timbuktu became a meeting-place of the finest poets, scholars, and artists of Africa and the Middle East. Timbuktu became the major Islamic center of sub-Saharan Africa.

After the death of Mansa Musa, the power of Mali began to decline. Mali had never been a proper empire, and subject states began to break off from the Mali sphere of influence. In 1430, the Tuareg Berbers in the north seized much of Mali's territory, including the city of Timbuktu, and the

Mossi kingdom to the south a decade later seized much of Mali's southern territories. Finally, the kingdom of Gao, which had been subjugated to Mali under Mansa Musa, gave rise to a Songhai kingdom that finally eclipsed the magnificent power of Mali.

1. How did the Kingdom of Mali grow?
2. Who was Mansa Musa? What are some of the achievements of Mansa Musa?
3. How did Mali fall?

Songhai

After the decline of Mali, in the late fourteenth century, Gao reasserted itself with the Sunni dynasty. Songhai would not fully eclipse Mali until the reign of the Sunni king, Sunni Ali, who reigned from 1464-1492. Sunni Ali aggressively turned the kingdom of Gao into an empire, the Songhai Empire. Sunni Ali based his military on a cavalry and a highly mobile fleet of ships. With this military, he conquered Timbuktu.

When Sunni Ali died, he was succeeded by Askia Muhammad (1493-1528). Askia Muhammad continued Sunni Ali's imperial expansion by seizing the important areas, including Mali itself. From there he conquered other surrounding lands. In addition, Askia Muhammad further centralized the government by creating a large and elaborate bureaucracy to oversee his extensive empire. He was also the first to standardize weights, measures, and currency, so culture throughout the Songhai began to normalize. Askia Muhammad was also a passionate Muslim; he replaced native Songhai administrators with Arab Muslims in order to Islamicize Songhai society. He also appointed Muslim judges to run the legal system under Islamic legal principles.

These programs of conquest, centralization, and standardization were the most ambitious and far-reaching in sub-Saharan history until the colonization of the continent by Europeans. With literally several thousand cultures under its control, Songhai was the largest empire in African history. While Islam and Islamic culture dominated the urban centers, the non-urban areas were not Islamic. The large majority of the Songhai people—around 97%—followed traditional African religions.

Songhai, however, had gotten too large; it encompassed too much territory to control. After the reign of Askia Duad, subject peoples began to revolt even though Songhai had an army of over 35,000 soldiers. The first major region to go was Hausaland; then Morocco rebelled and gained control over crucial gold mines. The Moroccans defeated Songhai in 1591 and the empire quickly collapsed. In 1612, the cities of Songhai fell into anarchy and the greatest empire of African history came to a sudden close.

1. How did Sunni Ali turn Songhai into an empire?
2. How did the Islamic religion affect Askia Muhammad's reign?
3. How did Songhai fall?