

African Government - Post Classical Period

Overview Thanks in part to the virtual absence of writing, the history of Sub-Saharan Africa is hard to chart, for the early centuries of our era. The region in question, from today's Mauritania/Niger/Chad/ Sudan, south to the southern tip of South Africa, was in postclassical times largely desert and grassland, and occupied by a variety of ethnic peoples; their societies had in the first 500 years C.E. hardly coagulated into governing entities more complex than family units, in process of developing into tribal structures. However with the gradual settling of populations, and the formation of more involved social structures, the stage was getting set for the rapid 'modernization' of the African cultural map.

The advent of high culture Well before the mid way point, in the first millennium C.E., we note the advent of elegant and significant African cities--like Jenne (in today's Mali, occupied 250 B.C.E.-800 C.E.); Timbuktu, also in Mali, first settled 11th century C.E.; or Kilwa, on the Indian Ocean, 1000-1500 C.E.--and of major Empires (Soninke ,from late 5th cent. C.E.; Ghana, from 8th cent. C.E.; Mali, from 13th cent. C.E., and the Kingdom of Kongo in the area of the present Democratic Republic of the Congo.)--through parts of which both West and central Africa developed to high levels of prosperity and governmental complexity. Concurrently with this complex of urban and governmental developments, one would want to add the rich chain of commercial merchant cities being scattered down the east coast of Africa, largely by the impulse of Islamic trade networks. By late in the first millennium the eastern littoral of Africa is under the sway of the Swahili language, and the Afro-Islamic trading zone; the East coast of Africa is studded with highly advanced commercial intellectual centers like Mogadishu, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Zimbabwe and Sofala.

Early west African governments: Soninke The governments of West African groups--collections of .)families into tribes into, very gradually, somewhat more extensive, district-like units--were clan based and governed either by councils of tribal elders or by chieftains. The 5th century C.E. saw the first significant developments of trade with the north--the south traded its gold supplies for commodities like salt--and with this trade, and the permanent occupations required to service it, small communities grew in complexity.

Early west African governments: Ghana The government of the Empire of Ghana--significant from the 8th to 13th centuries--was located far north of the contemporary nation of Ghana-. This Empire upped the stakes on the trans-Saharan trade routes, along which salt and fabrics from North Africa transected gold and slaves from the south, and large Ghanese courts accordingly surged from the sand, led by wealthy monarchs, from retainers to courtiers, and the kinds of local bureaucracy needed to record the tribute, and manage the trade with the North. (It is written that the Kings of this Empire ruled over subordinate kings, and exercised huge power with huge wealth.) During this period, it is most important to note, the trade from the North was increasingly involved with Islamic commercial interests, which had spread rapidly into Saharan regions, after the death of the Prophet Mohamed (570-632 C.E.).

Early west African governments: Mali In the 13th cent. C.E. the Empire of Mali, at first simply a subordinate branch of the Empire of Ghana, began to dominate trade routes and military control spots, and was for two centuries to dominate the trade routes and urban centers of West Africa. Conversions to Islam, especially among the Malian power elite, increasingly vast caravan expeditions back and forth through the Western Sahara, and military buildups all enabled the Malian Empire to concentrate within itself a power previously unknown in southern Africa. Two potent imperial rulers--Sundiata Keita (1190-1255 C.E.) and his grand-nephew (Mansa Musa (1312-1337 C.E.)--brought the power of Malian rulership to its wealthiest peak, before the decline which set in at the end of the 14th century C.E., as yet another Empire--but in a larger sense a more interconnected and complex southern Saharan culture world--took shape.

East African government: The case of Zimbabwe Each of the merchant cities along the East Coast of Africa--from Mogadishu to Zimbabwe--was by 1000 C.E. prosperous and sophisticated, drawing on contacts with Islamic scholars, as well as merchants, to participate in the rapidly converging intellectual and religious worlds of the times. The city-state of Zimbabwe, whose capital and greatest structure, Great Zimbabwe, was for a millennium (500-1500 C.E.) an entrepot between the Atlantic Coast of Africa and the interior, represented the kind of Islamic maritime touch-down point that enriched the many city-states that formed in post classical East Africa.

Reading

Odhiambo, E.S. Atieno, *A History of East Africa*, Athens (Ohio), 1978.

Ham, Anthony, *West Africa*, London, 2009.

Hopkins, Antony Gerald, *An Economic History of West Africa*, London, 2014.

Discussion questions

What kind of communications and connections were there between postclassical West Africa and postclassical East Africa? Were there individuals or groups who were (at the time) aware of the totality of developments on the sub-saharan continent? Do you find a coherent unity between West and East sub-saharan Africa?

What kinds of governmental structure are required to manage a vast chain-line trade across the Sahara? What kinds of special administrative skills are required?

Where did the vast numbers of slaves come from, that were sent north for sale, from the sub Saharan kingdoms? How much were they worth?

What kind of mining techniques were necessary, to extract a huge supply of gold from West Africa? Where were the mines? Are they there today?