

Chapter 26: Africa and the Atlantic World

Overview

For thousands of years, sub-Saharan Africa was a remote and isolated region, cut off from much of the outside world by vast oceans and the Sahara desert. In the eighth century, Muslim caravans reached West Africa, and in the tenth century Arab merchant ships began trading with the Swahili city-states of east Africa. These contacts were, for the most part, mutually beneficial to both African rulers and Muslim merchants. Traders sought gold, ivory, exotic foods such as kola nuts, and slaves. Africans, in turn, gained horses, salt, and other manufactured goods, and were also introduced to the religion, law, and culture of Islam. Several African societies, such as the Songhay, the Kongo, and the Ndongo, shifted from band-level units to larger, more formal kingdoms.

This political evolution was disrupted after the fifteenth century when Portuguese mariners reached the west coast of Africa. Direct European contact brought rapid and dramatic changes, which profoundly affected all sub-Saharan societies. Dimensions of that change include the following:

- Political upheaval. In the Kongo, for example, the Portuguese undermined the authority of the king and even assassinated uncooperative rulers.
- Outright conquest and settlement. Kongo, Ndongo, and south Africa became European settlements that had Africans as the servant class. The Swahili city-states were seized and forced to pay tribute.
- Intertribal warfare. Portuguese slave traders encouraged African slavers to make raids on their neighbors and to resist their own rulers. Coastal Dahomey profited from the slave trade, while inland peoples suffered.
- Economic exploitation. Indigenous economies were corrupted by the trade, exchanging slaves for manufactured goods such as guns and rum.
- Social disruption. Sixteen million able-bodied young Africans were enslaved between 1600 and 1800, two-thirds of them men. This disruption seriously impacted village and family life, especially in West Africa.

Chapter Outline

I. African Politics and Societies in Early Modern Times

A. The States of West Africa and East Africa

1. The Songhay empire was the dominant power of west Africa, replacing Mali
 - a. Expansion under Songhay emperor Sunni Ali after 1464
 - b. Elaborate administrative apparatus, powerful army, and imperial navy
 - c. Muslim emperors ruled prosperous land, engaged in trans-Saharan trade
2. Fall of Songhay to Moroccan army in 1591
 - a. Revolts of subject peoples brought the empire down
 - b. A series of small, regional kingdoms and city-states emerged
3. Decline of Swahili city-states in east Africa
 - a. Vasco da Gama forced the ruler of Kilwa to pay tribute, 1502
 - b. Massive Portuguese naval fleet subdued all the Swahili cities, 1505
 - c. Trade disrupted; Swahili declined

B. The Kingdoms of Central Africa and South Africa

1. Kongo, powerful kingdom of central Africa after fourteenth century
 - a. Established diplomatic and commercial relations with Portugal, 1482
 - b. Kings of Kongo converted to Christianity sixteenth century; King Afonso
2. Slave raiding in Kongo
 - a. Portuguese traded textiles, weapons, and advisors for Kongolese gold, silver, ivory, and slaves

- b. Slave trade undermined authority of kings of Kongo
 - c. Deteriorated relations led to war in 1665; Kongo king decapitated
 - 3. Kingdom of Ndongo (modern Angola) attracted Portuguese slave traders
 - a. Queen Nzinga led spirited resistance to Portuguese, 1623-1663
 - b. Nzinga able to block Portuguese advances but not expel them entirely
 - c. By end of the seventeenth century, Ndongo was the Portuguese colony of Angola
 - 4. Southern Africa dominated by regional kingdoms, for example, Great Zimbabwe
 - 5. Europeans in south Africa after the fifteenth century
 - a. First Portuguese, then Dutch mariners landed at Cape of Good Hope
 - b. Dutch mariners built a trading post at Cape Town, 1652
 - c. Increasing Dutch colonists by 1700, drove away native Khoikhoi
 - d. South Africa became a prosperous European colony in later centuries
- C. Islam and Christianity in Early Modern Africa**
 - 1. Islam popular in west Africa states and Swahili city-states of east Africa
 - a. Islamic university and 180 religious schools in Timbuktu in Mali
 - b. Blended Islam with indigenous beliefs and customs, a syncretic Islam
 - c. The Fulani, west African tribe, observed strict form of Islam, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
 - 2. Christianity reached sub-Saharan Africa through Portuguese merchants
 - a. Also blended with traditional beliefs
 - b. Antonian movement of Kongo, a syncretic cult, addressed to St. Anthony
 - c. Charismatic Antonian leader, Dona Beatriz, executed for heresy, 1706
- D. Social Change in Early Modern Africa**
 - 1. Kinship and clans remained unchanged at the local level
 - 2. American food crops, for example, manioc, maize, peanuts, introduced after the sixteenth century
 - 3. Population growth in sub-Sahara: 35 million in 1500 to 60 million in 1800

II. The Atlantic Slave Trade

A. Foundations of the Slave Trade

- 1. Slavery common in traditional Africa
 - a. Slaves typically war captives, criminals, or outcasts
 - b. Most slaves worked as cultivators, some as administrators or soldiers
 - c. With all land held in common, slaves were a measure of power and wealth
 - d. Slaves often assimilated into their masters' kinship groups, even earned freedom
- 2. The Islamic slave trade well established throughout Africa
 - a. Ten million slaves may have been shipped out of Africa by Islamic slave trade between eighth and the eighteenth centuries
 - b. Europeans used these existing networks and expanded the slave trade

B. Human Cargoes

- 1. The early slave trade on the Atlantic started by Portuguese in 1441
 - a. By 1460 about five hundred slaves a year shipped to Portugal and Spain
 - b. By fifteenth century African slaves shipped to sugar plantations on Atlantic islands
 - c. Portuguese planters imported slaves to Brazil, 1530s
 - d. Spanish settlers shipped African slaves to the Caribbean, Mexico, Peru, and Central America, 1510s and 1520s
 - e. English colonists brought slaves to North America early seventeenth century
- 2. Triangular trade: all three legs of voyage profitable

- a. European goods traded for African slaves
- b. Slaves traded in the Caribbean for sugar or molasses
- c. American produce traded in Europe
- 3. At every stage the slave trade was brutal
 - a. Individuals captured in violent raids
 - b. Forced marched to the coast for transport
 - c. The dreaded middle passage, where between 25 percent and 50 percent died

C. The Impact of the Slave Trade in Africa

- 1. Volume of the Atlantic slave trade increased dramatically after 1600
 - a. At height--end of the eighteenth century--about one hundred thousand shipped per year
 - b. Altogether about twelve million brought to Americas, another four million died en route
- 2. Profound impact on African societies
 - a. Impact uneven: some societies spared, some societies profited
 - b. Distorted African sex ratios, since two-thirds of exported slaves were males
 - c. Encouraged polygamy and forced women to take on men's duties
- 3. Politically disruptive
 - a. Introduced firearms; fostered conflict and violence between peoples
 - b. Dahomey, on the "slave coast," grew powerful as a slave-raiding state

III. The African Diaspora

A. Plantation Societies

- 1. Cash crops introduced to fertile lands of Caribbean early fifteenth century
 - a. First Hispaniola, then Brazil and Mexico
 - b. Important cash crops: sugar, tobacco, rice, indigo, cotton, coffee
 - c. Plantations dependent on slave labor
- 2. Plantations racially divided: one hundred or more slaves with a few white supervisors
 - a. High death rates in the Caribbean and Brazil; continued importation of slaves
 - b. Only about 5 percent of slaves to North America, where slave families more common
- 3. Resistance to slavery widespread, though dangerous
 - a. Slow work, sabotage, and escape
 - b. Slave revolts were rare and were brutally suppressed by plantation owners
 - c. 1793: slaves in French colony of Saint-Domingue revolted, abolished slavery, and established the free state of Haiti

B. The Making of African-American Cultural Traditions

- 1. African and Creole languages
 - a. Slaves from many tribes; lacked a common language
 - b. Developed creole languages, blending several African languages with the language of the slaveholder
- 2. African-American religions also combined elements from different cultures
 - a. African-American Christianity was a distinctive syncretic practice
 - b. African rituals and beliefs: ritual drumming, animal sacrifice, magic, and sorcery
- 3. Other African-American cultural traditions: hybrid cuisine, weaving, pottery

C. The End of the Slave Trade and the Abolition of Slavery

- 1. New voices and ideas against slavery

- a. American and French revolutions encouraged ideals of freedom and equality
 - b. Olaudah Equiano was a freed slave whose autobiography became a best-seller
2. Slavery became increasingly costly
- a. Slave revolts made slavery expensive and dangerous
 - b. Decline of sugar price and rising costs of slaves in the late eighteenth century
 - c. Manufacturing industries were more profitable; Africa became a market
3. End of the slave trade
- a. Most European states abolished the slave trade in the early nineteenth century
 - b. British naval squadrons helped to stop the trade
 - c. The abolition of slavery followed slowly: 1833 in British colonies, 1848 in French colonies, 1865 in the United States, 1888 in Brazil